

Intersecting Axes: Narrative and Culture
in
Versions of the Lizzie Borden Story
(A Performative Approach)

Stephanie Miller
PhD
Department of English and Related Literature
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines versions of the story of 32-year-old New Englander Lizzie Andrew Borden, famously accused of axe-murdering her stepmother Abby and father Andrew in 1892. Informed by narrative and feminist theories, *Intersecting Axes* draws upon interdisciplinary, contemporary re-workings of Judith Butler's concept of "performativity" to explore the ways in which versions of the Lizzie Borden story negotiate such themes as repetition and difference, freedom and constraint, revision and reprisal, contingency and determinism, the specific and the universal. The project emphasizes and embraces the paradoxical sense in which interpretations are both enabled and constrained by the contextual situation of the interpreter and analyzes the relationship between individual versions and the cultural constructs they enact while purporting to describe.

Moving away from symptomatic reading and its psychoanalytic underpinnings to focus upon the interpretive frames by which our understandings of Lizzie Borden versions (and of narrative/cultural texts more broadly) are shaped, this project exposes the complex performative processes whereby meaning is created. The chapters of this thesis offer contextual readings of a short story by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, a ballet by Agnes de Mille, a made-for-television by Paul Wendkos, and a short story by Angela Carter to argue for the theoretical, political, narratological, cultural, and interpretive benefits of approaching the relationship between texts and contexts through a uniquely contemporary concept of performativity, bringing a valuable new perspective to current debates about the intersection of narrative and culture.

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis.

Versions of Chapters 3 and 4 were submitted toward a taught Master of Arts in Modern Literature and Culture in 2007, but the degree was formally suspended in order to transfer the MA research toward the obtaining of a doctoral degree, so the work contained in this thesis has not previously been used in the obtaining of any other degree.

INTRODUCTION

Miss Lizzie (“so christened”¹) Andrew Borden: Victorian New-English spinster, philanthropist, and oft-alleged giver of doubly parricidal axe-whacks. Animal-lover, lesbian, masturbator, menstruator, kleptomaniac, necrophiliac, hysteric, epileptic. Maybe. Each of these descriptors has at one time or another been applied to Lizzie Borden, a woman whom an astonishing number of writers and artists have sought to understand, to represent, to erase, or to champion. As this dissertation will explore, versions of the Lizzie Borden story have emerged from an enormous range of genres, forms, and media over the 118 years since the daytime murders of Abby and Andrew Borden, a middle-aged couple from Fall River, Massachusetts. Owing to this trans-temporal ubiquity, the representing of the Borden story serves as a constant against which the variable cultural and historical circumstances of narrative production are thrown into relief (or challenged) by any given representation. Lizzie Borden versions thus offer a unique and valuable archive for the consideration of the relationship between narrative and culture—a project with weighty consequences (intellectual and political) for the interdisciplinary present. The concerns this project raises bear upon contemporary narratology, cultural studies, and feminism, as well as upon literary criticism.

In this introduction, I will first present some methodological concerns surrounding attempts to understand the historical Lizzie. Drawing upon these concerns, I explore the problematic relationship between culture and narrative (within both narratology and cultural criticism), exposing the inadequacy of existing concepts of “cultural narrative” to account for the interrelationship between the texts

¹ This phrase is drawn from “Lizzie Borden’s Inquest Testimony,” *The Lizzie Borden Sourcebook* (Kent and Flynn 52).

and contexts of the Lizzie Borden phenomenon. In Part I, I approach this problem from the narrative side, exploring the status of culture in narrative theory today and identifying the role of a dichotomy between “intentional” and “symptomatic” readings (and the psychoanalytic metaphor informing it) in limiting the success of some narrative/cultural projects. I reflect upon what sort of narrative theory one should bring to the interpretation of a cultural narrative (narrative texts-in-contexts); I suggest a model that is characterized by its recognition of the common gesture entailed in, on the one hand, advancing an argument with respect to a text’s “disposition of values” (Walsh *Rhetoric* 67) and, on the other hand, advancing an argument based on a proposed relationship between a text and its cultural contexts. Neither the relationship between a formal feature and its perceived narrative “whole” (or organizing agency, or “disposition of values,” or whatever) nor between a text and its contexts (whether those conventionally conceived of as “internal” or those considered “external”) are self-evident. Both are constructed, interpretive, and selective. I thus advocate as an alternative to psychoanalytic formulations a communicative model incorporating a pragmatic approach to fictionality (informed by Richard Walsh’s *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*) as a superior formulation to bring to the engagement with texts-in-contexts.

In Part II, I approach the narrative/culture question from the culture side. Acknowledging its complex interdisciplinary heritage, I introduce a self-consciously re-versioned concept of “performativity,” drawing upon recent work by Judith Butler, as an overarching framework to link my narrative agenda and my cultural agenda, and I consider broader applications for the model. I acknowledge those who have identified the Lizzie Borden fictional archive as a whole in the past and explain why the Lizzie Borden phenomenon provides a uniquely revealing archive for my

particular consideration of the relationship between narrative and culture, also providing an overview of prior scholarship surrounding the representation of violent women.

Part I: Lizzie Borden as Narrative Phenomenon: Approaching the Archive

So who was Lizzie, *really*, we must surely begin by asking?² Did she *really* kill her stepmother and father with a hatchet one morning in 1892, as so many writers and artists have taken pains to affirm or deny? Was she really the victim of incest, or did she kill to protect a different dark secret? Was her sister Emma the murderer, or was it Bridget, the maid they called Maggie, for reasons unknown but much guessed-at? These are some of the questions with which the Lizzie-Borden storyteller is faced at the start of his/her venture.

Given that this dissertation will explore a range of fictional texts that share as their inspiration a “real-life” character, real-life events, providing a synopsis of “the” story of the historical Lizzie seems a logical, chronological, and necessary precursor to the identification of the “deviations” of individual renderings. To explore variations, one must establish an ur-version, however contestable—right? Furthermore, one must come down on one side or the other of the controversies (how hot *was* the barn that day?³ Does one *really* wash fur with prussic acid?⁴) to produce

² I do not mean to repeat the infantilization of Lizzie perpetrated by earlier representations of the case by referring to her by her first name. I call Lizzie by her first name throughout this study, for two main reasons: (1) Most of the major players in the Lizzie Borden story share the name Borden, so first names are a logical way to differentiate. I suspect many previous scholars have been similarly motivated by this practicality. Also, though, (2) Lizzie Borden scholarship should always be a little bit tongue-in-cheek, and the use of the first name lends an air of self-conscious playfulness I hope to sustain throughout this thesis.

³ See “The Heat” (Appendix).

⁴ See “Poison” (Appendix).

a newest, truest version. One must understand the truth to see when/where the fictions “lie.” So I thought, when I first approached an archive spanning over 100 years and containing dozens of dedicated treatments.

The first questions the pursuit of Lizzie Borden truths raises are questions of authority. The mystery is unsolved, and available sources—though prolific—offer conflicting information. These two facts combine to create a crisis of authority. Because no one *knows*, the authority to *judge* suggests itself as attainable. How does one identify and/or create, wield such authority? In attempting to produce a reasoned, authoritative narrative, one turns instinctively to origins, which have at the very least a temporal advantage over their progeny. One seeks an “original” version of the story, a pristine representation un-tempered by the passage of time, the accumulation of cultural baggage, etc. One seeks eyewitness accounts, news narratives, and primary-source documents.

Due to the popularity of the case and the diligence of its enthusiasts, many primary-source documents have been made available online, including the complete trial transcripts and (more recently) Lizzie’s inquest testimony, on which fictional renderings draw heavily and often verbatim. The transcripts are often excerpted selectively to suit a particular creative or narrative agenda. In Evan Hunter’s 1984 *Lizzie*, for instance, actual testimony is framed with speculation as to characters’ thoughts and reactions. The transcripts, though dense and technical at times, are at other moments highly entertaining in themselves. (I remember vividly reading the inquest testimony for the first time. The moment the Victorian, circumlocutory legal discourse first inches toward the matter at hand—“Did you have any occasion to use [an] axe or hatchet?”—was truly chilling (Kent and Flynn 86).

Contemporaneous newspaper articles are also widely available through online databases, offering a range of perspectives on the case and varying accounts of the “facts” surrounding it. Some additional news reports not yet digitized in full are also collected in David Kent’s and Robert A. Flynn’s *The Lizzie Borden Sourcebook*, a useful (if a bit unwieldy) resource. But contemporaneous reports are highly sensational and often biased in favour of Lizzie’s guilt or innocence. They treat the case in various depth and sway with public interest and opinion and the availability of new information. Furthermore, these sources are fragmentary, piecemeal. They are full of false leads, rumours, bias, and dead ends. They don’t so much as suggest (let alone comprise) a single narrative, by any stretch of the imagination—or, rather, *only* by a stretch of the imagination—and even in their disjointed combined existence, they fail to encompass facets of the story now very much part of Lizzie Borden lore.⁵ In creating coherence from the hodgepodge, in constructing an ordered narrative from fragmentary truths and inferences, one is “tampering” with the “facts” in the very sense that a turn to the story’s origins is intended to avoid. Furthermore, in offering an interpretation of the “evidence,” one merely offers one’s own version of the story, an arbitrary basis for comparison.

Nonetheless, countless non-fiction authors with a wide range of credentials and a wider range of (ultimately unknowable) authorial agendas have taken a stab.⁶

⁵ In “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” Hayden White exposes “the cultural function of narrativizing discourse,” “the psychological impulse behind the apparently universal need not only to narrate but to give to events an aspect of narrativity” in the desire for “the discovery of the ‘real story’ within or behind the events that come to us in the chaotic form of ‘historical records’” (8). Through a consideration of the annals and chronicle forms of historical recording, he considers, “What would a non-narrative representation of historical reality look like?” (9). For more on the role of narrative in history, consult White’s broader oeuvre.

⁶ Fascinatingly, Lizzie Borden writers tend to revisit their subject matter, often years or even decades later. Kent, for instance, who co-compiled the useful *Lizzie Borden Sourcebook* and wrote *Forty Whacks: New Evidence in the Life and Legend of Lizzie Borden*, also wrote a play called *Slaughter on Second Street*; Edith Wharton produced a short story (“Confession”) and a play (*Kate Spain*); Agnes de Mille a ballet and a book (see Chapter 2); Angela Carter two short stories (see Chapter 4); and so

A review of some of the most significant, dedicated book-length studies might include Edwin Porter (1893), Edmund Pearson (1924, 1936, 1937, etc.), Edward Radin (1961), Robert Sullivan (1974), Frank Spiering (1984), Arnold Brown (1991), and Kent (1992). Porter was a reporter for *The Fall River Globe* during Lizzie's trial. His 1893 account is very detailed and ultimately unfavourable to Lizzie. Legend holds that Lizzie bought up every copy (Bellesiles 277). Crime-writer Pearson took up Lizzie's story first in *Studies in Murder* (1924) and later in *More Studies in Murder* (1936) and *The Trial of Lizzie Borden* (1937), among others of his works, offering an even greater level of detail with even more detailed (and arguably even more biased) interpretation. His latter version includes large excerpts from the court transcripts, and his representation of the murders—which argues strongly for Lizzie's guilt—is highly influential amongst students of the mystery. (It was, for instance, the first port of call for Agnes de Mille, the choreographer, in researching for her ballet version of the murders, *Fall River Legend* [De Mille 5].) Radin's was the next significant take on the Borden mystery. Radin opposed what he perceived as Pearson's unethical editing practice and insinuations of guilt and made a case for Bridget, the maid, as murderer. His was followed by that of Sullivan (who reinstated Lizzie as prime suspect), Spiering (Emma did it), Brown (Andrew's illegitimate son did it), and so forth. As this brief overview suggests, an extremely varied array of narratives are presented by ostensibly earnest speculators drawing largely upon the same resources.⁷

on. Some scholars might read this psychoanalytically as a manifestation of the compulsion to repeat, the Freudian revisitation of a trauma. For me, it is more useful to conceive of the revisitations as affirmation of the status of the Lizzie Borden narrative, in particular, and narrative, in general, as always in a process of becoming.

⁷ However, as Christine Berni notes, each brings to the mystery some degree of supposedly never-before-seen evidence, variable in novelty and persuasiveness (30). For the most part, each of the non-fictional book versions succeeds in debunking one or another aspect of its antecedents' renderings but

Popularity suggests itself as a relevant criterion for the consideration of a Lizzie Borden narrative as an appropriate ur-version for this study, in that writers of Lizzie Borden fiction might be most likely to have been influenced by the most popular versions, in theory. However, the popularity (as well as the availability and the perceived authority) of versions has varied enormously from one historical moment to the next, and obviously those sources one might identify as the most popular of all time are hardly relevant to fictional sources that predate them. Furthermore, fictional versions sometimes exceed their non-fictional counterparts in popularity, which rather undermines the validity of popularity as a basis for constructing the boiled-down, “true historical” narrative.

Non-book treatments of the case vary in form, style and content. *The Hatchet: Lizzie Borden’s Journal of Mystery, Murder and Victorian History* (formerly *The Lizzie Borden Quarterly*), a periodical published online and in print, accepts articles on almost any facet of the Lizzie Borden story, including fictional representations (to which its sister publication, *The Literary Hatchet*, is devoted exclusively), and keeps its readers up-to-date on current Lizzie Borden book and theatre releases, cultural events, etc. The website www.lizzieandrewborden.com hosts a “Lizzie Andrew Borden Virtual Museum and Library” with various online resources. Its blog (“Mondo Lizzie”) and user forum (“The Lizzie Borden Society Forum”) are hotspots for Borden enthusiasts seeking information or the opportunity to swap theories. Many of the controversies and rumours presented by the conflicting interpretations offered in Lizzie Borden books are hashed out in this context.

ultimately succumbs to the compulsion for narrative closure and provides an ending, a new or previously unsuspected suspect to provide a conclusion to the mystery.

Most scholarly articles or book chapters concerning Lizzie Borden approach the case from a legal and/or criminological perspective, rendering them ill-suited to serve as ur-version. See, for instance, John Wigmore's "The Borden Case," a well-known early legal perspective. Feminist scholars have also produced accounts of the trial from a legal perspective, including Jean S. Filletti's "Lizzie Borden and Lorena Bobbitt: Violent Women and Gendered Justice" in *The Journal of American Studies*, chapters in Cheree Carlson's *The Crime's of Womanhood* and Janice E. Scheutz's *The Logic of Women on Trial: Case Studies of Popular American Trials*, among others. Perhaps the most influential treatment in this category, one on which this dissertation draws directly, is that presented in Ann Jones's *Women Who Kill*, rereleased this past October by the Feminist Press. Jones's feminist interpretation of the case is often cited in studies of female violence.

Other academic approaches to the case tend to use it as an example or case study in support of a broader argument. In this vein, consider, for instance, Jennifer Jones's fascinating article on the possible lesbian relationship between Lizzie Borden and actress Nance O'Neil in *Passing Performances: Queer Readings of Leading Players in American Theatre* or the chapter on "Contesting Narratives" in H. Porter Abbott's *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, which uses Lizzie's trial as an example. While such texts enable the construction of a valuable context for the consideration of a given Lizzie Borden version (and/or the truth-value of its constituent elements, which can be relevant), neither individually nor collectively do they constitute or suggest a workable ur-narrative to serve as a control.

Despite the variety of existing versions, one might nonetheless consider consensus (however limited) as a basis for the construction of a narrative control. However, constructing commonalities between texts to be examined for their very

contextually contingent individual difference—while a useful activity⁸—is a discursive project with its own ends, not an implicit or self-revelatory back-process. Additionally, in aligning even the minutest details between versions, however ostensibly objectively relayed in their original context, one loses a sense of the function of that particular detail in the particular narrative version from which it is taken, again, the very individual difference at the heart of the project at hand. Furthermore, as I will also show, fictional narratives are often influenced by other fictional narratives, so fictional as well as non-fictional elements would have to be accounted for in the construction of an all-inclusive hypothetical version, of which a majority of elements would contradict one another.

Both the desire for and the difficulty in constructing an authoritative or all-inclusive hypothetical version of the story relate to ongoing scholarly debates about narrative, wherein the relationship between texts and context, between life and representation, and between the role of the author and the role of the reader have long been sites of controversy. I have begun my deliberately meandering approach to the Lizzie Borden fictional archive from a more or less narrative-oriented perspective, introducing some of the difficulties that the consideration of the Lizzie Borden phenomenon in the terms of that narrative discourse entails.

However, while the versions are certainly narrative, the phenomenon collectively, as I have begun to suggest, is (also) distinctly cultural. It is only possible to appreciate (or even to identify) the texts of the archive in context (to history, to one another, etc.). What tools, then, should one bring to the archive? Does one turn to narratology or to cultural studies? Despite shifts in narrative theory away from strict formalism toward more context-sensitive modes and simultaneous shifts

⁸ See Appendix.

in cultural criticism toward more self-conscious textuality, the theoretically troubling cultural narrativity/narrative culturality of the Lizzie Borden phenomenon still presents a certain methodological tension (potentially a methodological impasse, even). Contemporary criticism reveals the persistence of a dichotomy between narrative and culture, one that continues to be borne out in both narrative theory and in cultural criticism, as well as in popular conceptions of narrative and culture in everyday life.

The shift in narrative theory from formalism to context-sensitivity to which I refer is part of what Monika Fludernik's describes as one of the "first major paradigm shifts in narrative studies," from "classical" to "contextual narratology," an area of criticism she discusses in a section entitled, "Beyond Form: Pragmatics, Gender, and Ideology" (44). Fludernik acknowledges feminist, postcolonial, New Historicist and cultural approaches to narrative, among many others, as comprising a "vast area of narratological research that developed in the 1980s and 1990s [that] is ultimately ideological in orientation." (45). Narratological pursuits in these areas—being increasingly, as Fludernik emphasises, "symptomatic" in nature—anticipated (or precipitated) the "narrative turn," the "generalization of the term 'narrative' [...] within a wide spectrum of the social sciences, resulting in the application of narratological paradigms to legal, medical, psychological, or economic discourses" (46), a turn that within one of the two narrative histories Fludernik offers catalyzes the downfall of narratology as a discipline. In this particular historical narrative, however, Fludernik offers a rather more optimistic interpretation:

Such extensions are always charged with tension since the appropriation of narratological frameworks by non-literary disciplines often results in the dilution of the narratological basis, in a loss of precision, and the metaphoric use of narratological terminology. On the other hand, as Rimmon-Kenan has argued (2001), narrative theory

needs to come to terms with the deployment of its concepts in nonnarratological contexts [...] Instead of merely rejecting the application of narratological terminology to different subjects, narrative theory must try to theorize the extension of the concept and propose theoretical frameworks that counteract the attendant loss of precision. (Fludernik 47)

Fludernik's accusations of dilution and imprecision have some basis in reality.

Cultural-critical engagements with narrative phenomena sometimes fail to situate their narrative engagements in relation to often complex narratological histories, making unproblematised assumptions about basic narrative concepts long contested within the field of narratology itself. To put Fludernik's critique more bluntly, then, cultural studies could be seen as sometimes informed by sloppy narratology (not to mention vice versa), adopting loosely narratological concepts that may serve the particular rhetorical purpose of a particular cultural project but ultimately fail to produce findings that might be fruitfully related back to shed light on narratology itself. Other times, though, cultural studies is not doing bad narratology; it's doing something else.

Although Fludernik suggests it may be possible to assimilate the widely varied (and "diluted," "imprecise," "metaphoric") applications of narrative in contemporary criticism into a new concept of narratology, others question this possibility. Brian McHale, in his chapter in the same volume, views the "tension" Fludernik identifies as arising from non-narratological applications of narrative theory as an inevitable manifestation of the inherent irreconcilability of structural and historical understandings of narrative in general. McHale uses classic structural and historical readings to show how they always deconstruct to reveal historical or structural underpinnings, concluding that "[t]here is no 'pure' practice of narratology to be found, and no 'pure' historicist narrative theory either, but neither is there any

stable synthesis or seamless integration of the two—only a messy patchwork, a little of this and a little of that, first one thing and then the other” (68).

McHale’s diagnosis strikes a chord of critique—and it is indeed a critique of theorists who conceive of their work as “reconciling” history and structure (world and word), as McHale suggests most contextual narratologists do. However, the concept that there is neither a purely formal nor a purely contextual practice of narrative study, only ever a complex intermingling of the two approaches, is a very useful one to bring to the theorization of the interdisciplinary application of narrative concepts, to which this study of Lizzie Borden versions hopes to contribute. To avoid the accusations of dilution and imprecision put forward by Fludernik, cultural studies applications of narrative concepts need to be more precise in their evocation of narratological ideas, if only in that they must be clear about when and how those ideas are being applied figuratively, and thus to negotiate their “textual” and “contextual” moments more self-consciously.⁹ McHale’s observations echo tellingly H. Porter Abbott’s argument that “Reading [...] with an eye out for a text’s performative status—frequently involves passing back and forth between intentional and symptomatic modes of interpreting” (Abbott 142). That reading in light of a text’s performativity is seen here as enabling the site of the negotiation of intentional and symptomatic, structural and historical, modes of interpreting will be explored in greater depth shortly. I want first to analyze the step I have now made from the structure/history binary to the parallel intentional/symptomatic binary.

⁹ Although McHale critiques Fludernik’s concept of “cognitive historicism” as failing to do anything other than oscillate between structural and historical strategies, its self-conscious—indeed, nomenclatural—incorporation of narratological and historicist perspectives is a step in the direction of what more careful, responsible and useful-to-narratology negotiation of narrative and culture might look like.

Traditionally, the distinction between symptomatic and intentional readings (which are rarely invoked explicitly these days) is one to which narratologists have clung, and with which even we alleged symptomatic readers ourselves seem comfortable, perhaps because it allows us some place in or at least near narrative theory, which is better than none (or so one might think). The term comes in the first instance from what was, in a sense, a primarily cultural project, interestingly, not from an exploration of narrative for its own sake: Louis Althusser's application of Lacan to Marx within a structuralist linguistic model.¹⁰ Fludernik identifies symptomatic reading as a growing trend in "ideologically-oriented" criticism as distinct from other contextual narratology (pertaining to "pragmatics" and "gender" [44-45]), but in wider use the term remains defined primarily in opposition to intentional reading (see, for instance, Abbott 100-105), and as such often comes to subsume all of contextual narratology. Given its obviously loaded cultural *and* narratological heritage, is it not odd that "symptomatic reading" comes to serve as a blanket term for any narrative interpretation that engages with historical/cultural context—as if no other relationship between narrative and culture were possible?

As Fludernik sees it, symptomatic readings seek "to locate textual strategies that signal unconscious or repressed psychological or ideological 'drive' which the critic uncovers, reading "against the grain" of the text" (45). It is this psychoanalytic understanding of symptomatic readings that most directly informs the function of the intentional/symptomatic distinction in narrative theory today. (The psychoanalytic metaphor informs the Jamesian concept of repressed historicity as well as that of repressed psychological drives.) One major problem with this opposition is the

¹⁰ For early literary-critical versions, see Pierre Macherey *A Theory of Literary Production*, Eagleton *Criticism and Ideology* and Jameson *The Political Unconscious*.

hierarchical relationship it suggests. Speaking from the perspective of symptomatic readers, Fludernik observes what she describes (whether out of politeness or—given her aforementioned belief in narratology’s need to roll with the ideological punches—self-preservation!) as a “broadening of the complexity of narrative issues” associated with the rise of the (poststructuralist) symptomatic reading:

There are narrative and rhetorical techniques used by the author to convey his or her meanings, but these techniques become split between their ostensible signifying functions and their secret and insidious conveyings of ideological purport. The scenario is even further complicated by the fact that postcolonial, feminist, and Marxist critics frequently detect signs in which the text surreptitiously seems to undermine or put in doubt its ostensible ideological drift [,,] What has not been systematically analyzed in narratology are the structural patterns to which such readings resort [...F]requently, no specific formal elements signal ideological symptoms or their subversion; rather, the frame within which the texts are read opens up avenues of interpretation that within a different (patriarchal, colonial, capitalist, etc.) frame were not initially salient in the reading process. (46)

Fludernik’s somewhat tongue-in-cheek description here (reflected in her use of “secret and insidious”, “surreptitiously” and “resort”) nods to a far-reaching (and perhaps healthy) scepticism within narratology as to the legitimacy of symptomatic readings in a narratological context. To the extent that, as I have suggested above, symptomatic readings come to refer to all contextual narratology, this hierarchical formulation means that readings presented as drawing solely or exclusively upon “textual” material, without “resorting” to contextual information, are privileged over their “symptomatic” (read: less textually substantiable) counterparts. This concept of symptomatic reading seems to me quite a narrow interpretation of the diverse aims of the entire gamut of postcolonial, feminist, psychoanalytic, ideological and cultural approaches to interpretation. Many of the scholars in the numerous disciplines Fludernik implicates as “ideologically-oriented” do not consider themselves to be

questing for a text's "unconscious or repressed psychological or ideological 'drive,'" as recent scholarship (discussed below) confirms. Furthermore, the application of the concept of "symptomatic reading" to ideologically-oriented contextual narratology more broadly is objectionable because it enforces a psychoanalytic model for the interpretation of narrative in general, with all its correspondent implications of "latent" vs. "manifest" content, deep vs. surface structure, underlying ideological consciousnesses, and emphasis on what texts "don't say."

Various scholars—most notably Sharon Marcus—have recently identified the inapplicability of the psychoanalytic formulation as upheld by the intentional/symptomatic distinction to contemporary literary and cultural criticism in practice.¹¹ In their introduction to a special issue of the multidisciplinary journal *Representations*, "The Way We Read Now," Stephen Best and Marcus aptly note the *variety* of ways in which the featured critics (as reflective of literary criticism more broadly) seek to break from the constrictive psychoanalytic conception of "symptomatic" reading and how their approaches negotiate texts and contexts, textual presences and *perceived* absences, without recourse to the concept of the unconscious. In doing so, the featured readings illustrate the possibility for more responsible negotiations of texts and contexts than those enabled by their psychoanalytically-conceived counterparts. As my readings of Lizzie Borden versions will demonstrate, a break from the notion of contextually-substantiated literary interpretation as questing for the unconscious drive of a text is necessary to the accurate and useful theorization of the interdisciplinary applications of narrative and essential to the understanding of Lizzie Borden versions.

¹¹ The 2006 meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association devoted a three-day panel, hosted by Sharon Marcus, to "Symptomatic Reading and its Discontents" (Best and Marcus 20).

For my project, one major consequence of the break with a psychoanalytic model of interpretation is the need for a redefinition of the main terms in which narrative is traditionally understood, *fabula* and *sujet*, which in their typical applications rely on the psychoanalytic formulation. As Walsh describes, “The distinction between *fabula* and *sujet* is, according to various commonsensical definitions, the distinction between what happens in a narrative and how it is told” (*Rhetoric* 52). *A Dictionary for Critical Theory* offers one such “commonsensical” definition: “A distinction drawn by Russian Formalism between the story told (*fabula*) and the imaginative way in which that story is actually narrated (*sju-et*)” (Buchanan). This definition is typical in its association of *fabula* with “story.” In prefacing his critique of the terms in their conventional invocations, Walsh observes, “In current usage there is no clear distinction between *fabula* and, for example, story, despite the latter’s structuralist pedigree” (53). According to the influential definition offered in Seymour Chatman’s *Story and Discourse*, “story” may be understood as “the continuum of events presupposing the total set of all conceivable details, that is, those that can be projected by the normal laws of the physical universe. In practice, of course, it is only that continuum and that set actually inferred by a reader, and there is room for difference in interpretation” (28). *Discourse*, conversely, is associated with the “order and selection” of the narrative, the sequence of events and what gets included (Chatman 28).

Traditionally, and in a “commonsensical” kind of way, the Lizzie Borden versions might be described as different discursive manifestations of the same “story,” the premise with which I began, but as the frustration of the quest for an ur-version attests, the versions differ so significantly in the stuff of traditional “story” that it is difficult to make this argument. The “Accused” protagonist of de Mille’s

1948 ballet *Fall River Legend* has relatively little in common with the Lizzie Borden of 1975 American primetime television, and neither do they serve the same narrative function. Furthermore, “to say that a film and a novel have the same fabula, or story...to refer this equivalence back to a common deep structure adds nothing [...] Such narrative sameness is interpretive, posterior [...] and it is negotiated in terms of actual versions, without recourse to an abstract structural congruence” (Walsh *Rhetoric* 63). The disparate Lizzies relate to one another, of course, and they share certain qualities (among them, indeed, a historical “referent”), but as I suggested earlier, their relation to other versions and their contextual-rootedness yield more interest than their sameness, and the discursive work entailed in the hypostatisation of a generic version undermines its validity as a narrative control. The traditional concept of story implies a psychoanalytic model, in that it reads a given version as the narrative activation of latent, pre-narrative content, rather than the creation of that content through the narrative itself. In addition to its inaccuracy, this formulation is also politically problematic, since any version is conceived of as merely “repressing” its imagined (or imaginable) alternative.

Walsh proposes a redefinition of fabula and sujet that subverts their hierarchical relationship and that—I would argue—eliminates the need for recourse to the unconscious in explaining the relationship of text to context (which he constructs in relation to fictionality, his overarching lens). Walsh’s approach is pragmatic, and as such is in keeping with contemporary trends in narrative theory and both literary and cultural criticism more broadly. Walsh proposes a notion of fabula as an “interpretive exercise” such that “sujet is what we come to understand as a given (fictional) narrative, and fabula is how we come to understand it. Our understanding, in other words, is not of ‘what happened’; it is of the weight and

import of the narrative as actually told” (*Rhetoric* 68). In the context of historical narrative, Walsh notes, “fabula serves not as the uninflected story beneath the rhetorical manipulations of sujet, but simply as the means of throwing sujet rhetoric into relief” (*Rhetoric* 67). This perspective is useful for interpreting versions of the Lizzie Borden story, the “what” of which is interesting largely in its reflection of the “how.” Whereas a version might traditionally might have been understood as the selecting and ordering of a pre-extant array of narrative units comes instead to construct those units in its narration of them, which places foremost significance on a given version (a single text-in-context) itself, eliminating the need for a generic ur-version. Following Walsh’s model, information from or comparisons to other versions—real or imagined—are drawn upon as part of the interpretive process, not as if textually contained, but on the basis of their (constructed) relevance to the given interpretation.¹² This approach is particularly helpful in providing a framework for the consideration of “new” elements, like de Mille’s execution of Lizzie, without having to vastly broaden the imagined “general” version for every new element, potentially beyond recognisability.

Walsh’s approach to these terms has implications for the way we might talk about narrative in terms of units, as well, changing the conversation but not inhibiting it. Because the redefinition of fabula subverts its passivity, narrative units become units of process. Narrative units actively present discourse; they are not the acted-on effect of prior discursive processes. The execution of Lizzie Borden in de Mille’s ballet, for example, need not be interpreted strictly as an effect, a passive event beneath its depiction in the haunting, jerky, twitchy, choreography danced beneath a visual gallows. Neither need it necessarily be interpreted as the

¹² For a more detailed explanation of the role of relevance in Walsh’s model, see *Rhetoric* 20-32.

manipulation of an imagined alternative version of events, nor yet as the effect of the discursive process of its imagined selection from a hypothetical fabula comprising all possible events relating to all Lizzie Borden versions past and present. To think of it in this way is almost to conceive of the inclusion of the event as the effect of its own inclusion. It adds an unnecessary dimension. The execution *is* its narrative inclusion. In other words, it is constituted in its narration. My knowledge of other versions may allow me to identify it as unique, and this may be relevant to a meaningful understanding of the ballet, but the observed relation to other versions, real or imagined, and to other contexts, is interpretive on my part, not something existing “within” the version itself. To my thinking, one positive outcome of this approach is that it can be used to send the trajectory of analysis of multiple-version narratives in a new direction. Instead of driving away at an imaginary centre, the analytical perspective can be shifted to allow vari-directional traffic, and thus enable the outward turn from text to context.

How exactly does a pragmatic approach to fictionality shed light on the debate surrounding the negotiation of texts and contexts in narrative-focused cultural studies? In his review of *The Routledge Encyclopaedia of Narrative Theory*, Walsh notes the prevalence of entries that “take the form ‘[discipline/field] and narrative,’ or ‘[generic/historical/ethnographic modifier] narrative’” (“How to Explore” 569); such entries often refer to the sort of cultural-critical applications of narrative I have been discussing here. The “[discipline/field] and narrative” phenomenon links to Fludernik’s understanding of interdisciplinary applications of narrative theory and to the Frankensteinian patchwork of formal and historical strategies identified by McHale. I argue that the pragmatic approach to fictionality defined in Walsh’s *Rhetoric of Fictionality* provides a way of conceptualizing the relationship between

contexts and texts (between “[discipline/field]” and “narrative”) that does not undermine formal or historical approaches to narrative (nor, even, their careful intermingling), but frames them in a new way:

In contrast with extant accounts, a pragmatic theory of fictionality does not require any detachment of fictive discourse from its real-world context. There is no need for a principle of minimal departure to supply a background for the narrative particulars, because this role is filled by *contextual assumptions*. These are not part of a fictional world, but of the communicative situation. (*Rhetoric* 36, my emphasis)

In a sense, the fact of narrative fictionality itself (the unstable nature of the “communicative situation” of narrative and the “contextual assumptions” for which it provides the impetus) thus provides the basis for both “inside” and “outside” (37) interpretations (see related quote below). I have highlighted the phrase “contextual assumptions” because I argue that context (as a concept) cuts across the inside/outside boundary in the same way fictionality does (for Walsh), which is worthwhile to point out because despite the highly controversial relationship between word and world, as interpreters we draw upon the idea of context quite naturally all the time, in practice. Even the strictest formalist will quite casually refer to a formal feature in the “context” of the narrative whole, the authorial or implied authorial “intent,” or the text’s “disposition of values.” Of the inside/outside dichotomy, Walsh observes in literary criticism the same “oscillation” between structural and historical analysis noted by Brian McHale:

My argument is specifically directed against the entrenched idea that fictive discourse entails a formal, intentional, or ontological frame. All current approaches to fictionality invoke some such frame, and literary criticism negotiates with the fact by a kind of equivocation, doublethink, or fudge: that is, even while its *raison d’être* is arguably to bridge the gulf between fiction and reality, it actually tends to oscillate between views from either side. It collaborates with, participates in, the fiction; or else it detaches itself, in the process often opening up a gap between the enlightened critic and the naive,

deluded reader. The first, inside, view dominates in most close reading and representationally oriented criticism (by which I mean criticism focused upon the narrative particulars); the second, outside, view is often apparent in formalist and reader-response critical orientations (at last insofar as they project stories of reader), and symptomatic modes of criticism that bring to bear (for example) Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytical, queer, or postcolonial perspectives upon the text [...] By refusing this inside/outside dualism, a pragmatic approach to fictionality identifies the issue it effaces: it does not, and should not, conflict with what we currently do as readers and critics, but it identifies something we are not doing that I suggest would be worthwhile. It challenges us to explain the force and effect of fictionality itself in our experience and understanding of fiction. (*Rhetoric* 37)

In its acknowledgment of the role of contextual assumptions based on the communicative situation of a narrative in the construction of an interpretation, a pragmatic approach to fictionality informs a highly workable model of narrative theory to bring to the engagement with texts-in-contexts the Lizzie Borden phenomenon entails.

So far, I have outlined very briefly some of the concepts from narrative theory informing my texts-in-contexts approach to the Lizzie Borden archive. In short, what I wish to take from contemporary narratology is a questioning of the psychoanalytic metaphor for the contextual interpretation of narrative texts, a communicative model for a narrative's situatedness, a pragmatic approach to fictionality, and a pragmatic, relevance-based (self-consciously interpretive) approach to the word/world relationship. The shift of the conversation to the cultural side of the project is a very tricky one. I have suggested the inadequacy of a psychoanalytic metaphor to the illumination of the Lizzie Borden phenomenon as cultural narrative and its problematic political implications. Drawing on the communication model for narrative interpretation, I now wish to propose another metaphor, a familiar, highly contentious one: performance.

Performativity is in some ways an obvious concept to bring to bear upon the negotiation of formal and contextual reading strategies within textual interpretation, in that over the course of its contemporary history, its metaphor comes from culture (theatre and everyday performance), is drawn in relation to narrative (Austin, Searle, speech act theory), then via philosophy (Derrida, Butler, etc.) travels back to bear upon culture again (feminism, queer theory, and beyond).¹³ Its interdisciplinary travels have been bumpy, but precisely because the concept is so vexed, because it has been re-contextualized and reformulated so often and with such wide-ranging consequences, it provides just the right sort of challenge to a project pushing the limits of narrative/cultural engagement. I will argue that uniquely in its contemporary interdisciplinary incarnations, performativity presents a viable critical and political framework. It negotiates the universal and the singular, the rule and the citation, the symbolic and the material, in ways invaluable to the consideration of the Lizzie Borden phenomenon.

I want to consider how a “reversioned” concept of performativity—with performance as its guiding metaphor (and not its prototypical example)—drawing upon contemporary reinterpretations of Butler (in particular Elizabeth Freeman’s concept of “temporal drag” [728], which accounts for the often subversive “reverting” aspect of what Lizzie Borden versions do), might enable the negotiation of texts in contexts (narrative and historical analysis) in a way that can have meaningful consequences for both narrative theory and cultural criticism. I also want to use performativity as a model for the consideration of the relationship between the texts and contexts of the Lizzie Borden phenomenon, and between the individual version and the historical phenomenon of Lizzie Borden versioning.

¹³ Culler notes a version of this “migrating” path in *The Literary in Theory* 16.

David Gorman has harshly criticized literary-critical applications of performativity (in the same vein in which Fludernik identifies “metaphoric” applications of narrative concepts more broadly), asking “whether there is any actual *basis* in Austin’s thought for using such a generalized notion of performativity as a tool of analysis” (98). Given the confrontational tone of Gorman’s piece, one might be inclined to respond “Who cares?” or even “Mind your own business.” Most of the applications of speech act theory Gorman cites were not primarily undertaken for the sake of speech act theory itself—are they under obligation to serve a strictly narratological as well as a literary-critical agenda? Given the resonance with Fludernik’s reference to the “metaphoric” application of narrative concepts, however, and the mutually narrative and cultural aims of this project, I would like to begin to consider the problem more deeply: Is it possible to apply a narrative concept like the performative, with all its cultural and narratological baggage, in a “metaphorical” or “generalized” way that can still shed light on narrative in its own right, *as* narrative, as well as on culture (or literary/cultural texts-in-contexts, as I will continue to refer to this aspect of my project)? What are the politics of such a gesture? How can such a move enable a responsible reading strategy, and what would its application to the Lizzie Borden phenomenon entail?

Part II: Lizzie Borden as Cultural Phenomenon: “Doing Things” with Performativity

As I have already suggested, performativity has enjoyed a long and varied heritage of narratological, literary-critical, cultural and political applications. While some, such as Gorman, have condemned the “looser” deployments of performativity

as inadequately engaged with their philosophical/linguistic origins in J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*, Jonathan Culler, whose understanding of performativity I will be revisiting later in this introduction, has aptly noted that "the performative, like the picaresque hero, travels far to make its fortune" (*Literary in Theory* 140). Although incontrovertibly many literary and cultural applications of the concept of performativity, especially in relation to gender, may be understood to bite the Austinian hand that feeds them, in doing so they have provided the basis for a significant and pervasive rethinking of literature and culture, especially gender, in ways that far exceed the potential for literal application suggested by Austin's own theory (at a particular, much-cited point in a particular, much-referenced lecture series).¹⁴ However disloyally, many literary evocations of performativity adopt primarily its implications for a text's contextual situatedness and its theatrical metaphor, which provides a way of understanding the way a literary text seems to convey a pre-existent meaning. On the basis that most of the applications of performativity by which my application of the concept here is inspired indeed deviate dramatically from their roots in Austin, I will refer to pre-Butlerian concepts of the performative only obliquely, beginning my engagement proper with *Gender Trouble* (1990).

I introduce the concept of performativity not as a solution to the vexing narrative and cultural issues raised by the Lizzie Borden archive, but as a tool for analysing and describing them. The concept of gender performativity put forward in *Gender Trouble* is a useful one to bring to bear upon the Lizzie Borden phenomenon because it helps to describe the paradoxical sense in which the versions constitute the phenomenon (of Lizzie Borden versioning or, indeed, of the Lizzie Borden construct

¹⁴ For an influential feminist literary-critical application, see Felman.

itself) to which they simultaneously seem to refer (or to represent). In *Gender Trouble*, Butler proposes a concept of gender not as an essence pre-existing its expression in gendered acts but rather constituted through the repeated acts themselves, a “substantive effect [...] performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” (33). Thus, for the Butler of *Gender Trouble*, “[G]ender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. [...] There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (*Gender Trouble* 33). Gender is thus, famously, a “doing” and not a “being,” “though not by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed,” and language (as others have alleged) is revealed to enact what it purports to represent (33). The Lizzie Borden construct may also be understood as a “doing,” not a “being,” a process rather than an essence. This formulation accounts for the seeming referentiality of the versions to the Lizzie Borden construct that in fact they perform, the basis for the intuitive but misguided understanding of “the story” of Lizzie Borden as existing independent of its narration in the versions.¹⁵

The criticisms to which the original concept of performativity as developed in *Gender Trouble* was subjected reflect in part the difficulty of the paradoxical negotiation of freedom and constraint the theory entails. Most prominent among such criticisms were the somewhat ironically opposite accusations of voluntarism and determinism. (That the theory leaned itself readily to directly opposite critiques to

¹⁵ This is a manifestation of a tension comparable in some ways to what Culler calls the “double logic” of narrative interpretation, whereby a narrative “presents [...] its plot as a sequence of events which is prior to and independent of the given perspective on these events, and, at the same time, suggesting by its implicit claims to significance that these events are justified by their appropriateness to a thematic structure” (*Literary in Theory* 178). This is a helpful way to think about the Lizzies. Versions both imply a relation to the truth, the original, unaltered events, and simultaneously assert that those events are appropriate – or relevant, or meaningful, more accurately—given their discursive representation in this *particular* version above all others. See also Culler’s discussion of the “primacy of events” (*Pursuit of Signs* 98).

me attests not to its weakness but to its potential versatility; a deconstructive tool *should* elicit dichotomous objections, surely.) On the one hand, the concept of gender as performative seems to suggest the possibility of performing it differently, as if it were possible for a subject to choose from a range of possible identity performances. (Butler's notorious example of drag as parodic performance, in particular, sparked criticisms from this perspective.) On the other hand, Butler's suggestion that gender is performed in a context of "regulatory practices" (*Gender Trouble* 23), rules that govern conventional performances and limit possible performances, seemed to some to leave little opportunity for resistance. Furthermore, Butler's original theory arguably left questions unanswered as to the negotiation of the material and the symbolic, the role of the body inadequately defined.

In response to these criticisms, performativity evolved. One could delineate its subsequent history in a number of ways,¹⁶ but I am going to offer a version of particular relevance to the Lizzie Borden phenomenon: that taking off from what Culler identifies as Butler's "Derridean inheritance" (*Literary in Theory* 162), begun, in a sense, in Butler's *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* and adapted and improved in her later and contemporary work alongside other post-9/11 revisitations of the concept. These re-workings share as their primary strengths (1) an emphasis on contingency (2) a degree of pragmatism and (3) that they explore the performativity of gender in a context sensitive to the performativity of cultural meaning more broadly. These re-workings offer a refined version of the performative that provides a sound theoretical basis for a literary-critical project positioned (like this one) at the nexus of narrative and culture.

¹⁶ See Culler's excellent overview in "The Performative," *The Literary in Theory*.

The paradoxically voluntarist and determinist implications of *Gender Trouble* are important to consider in relation to the application of performativity to the Lizzie Borden archive because the versions may be understood (and seem to understand themselves) as both free to innovate and constrained by their referentiality to an “original”. Innovations are often presented as “manipulations,” as if of pre-existing, pre-narrative material (akin to the acts conventionally interpreted as expressions of gender). In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler counters allegations of voluntarism and determinism and introduces an emphasis on contingency that pervades her later work. Rebutting claims of voluntarism, she clarifies that, “[P]erformativity cannot be understood outside a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms” (95). Drawing upon this Derridean concept of iterability, Butler emphasizes that “the ‘performance’ is not a singular ‘act,’ or event” (95). It is “ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance” (*Bodies That Matter* 95).¹⁷ That the outcome of a “performance” cannot be “determined in advance,” despite its situation within a context of strictly regulated ritual, reveals, crucially, the possibility for transformation of the conventions that determine the repetitive acts by which they are also constituted.¹⁸

¹⁷ For more on iterability, see Derrida.

¹⁸ This uncertainty and incompleteness inspires the project of *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), in which Butler demonstrates the subversive potential of the contingency of the performative by exploring the disjunct between injurious speech and its effects, in which she argues that the opportunity for resistance is located specifically in the uncertainty of the outcome of the performative speech act: “[A] loosening of the link between act and injury [...] opens up the possibility for a counter-speech, a kind of talking back, that would be foreclosed by the tightening of that link” (15).

The transformative potential arising from the uncertain outcome of a performative has useful implications for literary-critical applications of the theory. On one hand, a model of performativity that emphasizes the contingency of any given performance as just one among implied alternative possible performances might seem to invite criticism on the same basis I earlier criticized the psychoanalytic model for “symptomatic” reading as uncovering repressed (or disavowed) meanings. Symptomatic readings are conventionally posited as reading for a text's “unconscious,” what the text “doesn't say,” its “repressed” meanings, and so on. Likewise, critics who use performativity to emphasize a given “performance” (of gender, of subjectivity, of textual meaning) as just one of infinite possible performances (albeit limited by more-or-less-explicitly acknowledged factors deriving from its contextual situatedness), end up interpreting a text in relation to its “implied” imaginable alternatives (whether perceived as normative or subversive). I would agree that to actually describe such imagined alternatives to a given performative (or text, since we are discussing performativity in relation to literature and not to singular speech acts) *as if* somehow hidden *within* or coming directly *from* a thus personified text in the form of an interpretation (to offer a traditional “symptomatic reading,” in other words) conceals the active construction (the active imagining of alternatives) taking place on the part of the contextually-situated (and thus [re]contextualizable) reader. (Positioning an interpretation in such a way falls back upon the notion of “essence” theorists like Butler sought to deconstruct.) On the other hand, though, it is possible to accept performative contingency not as a textual property but as an attribute of interpretation deriving from what Walsh describes as the “communicative situation” of narrative, and thus to approach it pragmatically.

To say that texts do something, as literary proponents of performativity do, to say that texts are performative, personifies the text, which is not problematic in and of itself, except in the fact that it displaces agency from the active reader onto the passive text, which is un-conducive to responsible reading (with problems akin to those associated with voluntarist interpretations of gender performance). To say that texts are performative suggests that texts perform (and potentially hide alternative) meanings, in context, which is inaccurate, since it is readers who construct meanings (and text/context connections). We're the ones who "do things with" texts, to pun on Austin. Thus, while it may seem that texts perform Lizzie Borden versiondom, this formulation is not precisely accurate. A text's perceived versiondom (or genre, say, or even its apparent "completeness") is really constructed by interpreters, retrospectively. This is not to say this does not remain a useful way to talk about texts; it merely seeks to draw greater attention to the role of the interpreter the personification of texts tends to conceal.

Rejecting the notion of a textual essence attainable through symptomatic reading thus entails a shift of attention from hypostasized textual interiors to readerly engagements with texts. In their introduction to the 2008 study *Judith Butler and Political Theory*, Samuel A. Chambers and Terrell Carver note that given her rejection of the concept of gender as essence (and her espousal of a concept of gender defined, rather, by the acts previously understood as its expressions), Butler

focuses on the gestures and other subtle bodily actions that signal to an observer that "that person is a woman." This is a view of *surfaces*, i.e. dress and gesture, rather than a view of *depth*, i.e. bodily structures and organs, otherwise known as "biology." As such, her account marks an interesting philosophical reversal of emphasis in declaring the importance and meaning of a phenomenon. Butler very self-consciously focuses on how something "seems"—how we initially make sense of it—rather than on how it "really is." (39, my emphasis)

Such a view strikes me as tellingly—indeed, uncannily—commensurate with the concept of “surface reading” proposed by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus in their introduction to *The Way We Read Now*. In the spirit of moving away from “symptomatic reading,” “surface reading” attends to:

what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*. (Best and Marcus 9, emphasis in original)

While this reformulation rightly challenges the concept of a textual essence beneath a textual surface, I am uncertain as to what extent “surface” and “depth,” in their dualism, their hierarchical ordering (conventional or inverted, as in Best and Marcus), and—most objectionably—their necessary relationality, remain useful terms.¹⁹ Adopting, however, their useful rejection of the notion of a hidden textual interior, I will suggest that for the purposes of this thesis, there is no need to refer to a textual “surface,” only to the rhetorical relationship between text and context constructed by an interpreter.

I should clarify that the object of this project is not to argue, redundantly, that the meanings of texts reside in the readerly engagement with texts rather than within the texts themselves *per se* (although of course to some extent my readings uphold that argument). Rather, that textual meanings are culturally produced is the condition of my more specific arguments, which use the concept of performativity and the narrative/culture issues the Lizzie Borden versions expose to explore *how* those textual meanings are culturally produced and the political consequences of those

¹⁹ To the extent they might remain useful, “depth” might be redefined to refer to a text’s contextual situatedness, an “external” (interpretive) rather than an “internal” depth.

productions (especially when expressed *as if* deriving from textually resident properties).

Performativity is an important concept for a consideration of the cultural production of textual meaning because it allows us to ask (for example) what it means that the Lizzie Borden versions enact what they purport to describe, and because it shifts the conversation from essence to act, commensurate with the shift from text to interpretation associated with reader-response theories. My conceptualization of “context” as a theoretical tool also relates to reader-response/reception approaches in that it seeks to cut across the intention/reception dichotomy by emphasizing the mutual constructedness of the gesture whereby one considers a narrative feature in relation to the narrative “whole” or a text in relation to its perceived contexts. Correspondingly, it deconstructs any kind of neat opposition between New Historicism and historical materialism one might posit, like that offered, for example, in the necessarily tidy *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory*, according to which New Historicism holds that “cultural texts are agents of history,” “the means by which history is made,” whereas historical materialists regard such texts as “symptoms of history” (Buchanan). As critics often describe in practice, and as the readings offered in this thesis will demonstrate, texts are neither purely “agents” nor purely “symptoms” of history, but rather their meaning is created through the interpretation of a complex intersection of textual and contextual features, the construction of rhetorical, performative links between word and world. Meaning resides neither in text nor in reader, but at the point where reader meets text. I argue that textual meanings are determined neither by their (actual or implied)

author nor by their (actual or implied) reader(s) but performatively, through contextually-contingent interpretations.²⁰

To put it another way, I am not making claims as to how these texts were intended or received in their time, nor am I *generalizing* about how they should be received now, although arguments about any of these might be part of my approach to a given text. Furthermore, my rejection of the concept of a hidden textual interior does not disallow that texts might be interpreted symbolically or allegorically. In contrast, as Freeman argues of queer performativity, I maintain that literature is indeed “complexly allegorical” (734). As Jane Elliott notes, “[C]ountless analyses of popular culture have taught us [that] allegorical meanings do not have to become explicit in either production or reception in order to be operative in the consumption of popular culture texts” (8). It is in this spirit that I approach the Lizzie Borden archive. Although I do not offer my “ideologically-oriented” interpretations as trans-contextually valid, I claim that they are valid not only in the immediate context in which they are offered but also that—in their contextually-situated validity—they are important to the future critical history of the text. More importantly, they promise to shed light on our understanding of the relationship between text and context (between narrative and culture) more broadly.

I have suggested previously that one of the unique merits of contemporary re-workings of performativity is that they accept the performativity of gender as one facet of the performativity of narrative and cultural meaning more broadly. (This approach does not disallow for the validity of feminist political claims for feminism’s sake; it means that such claims may be understood to function in a

²⁰ My research feeds usefully into ongoing debates surrounding reader-response and reception theory. For the key texts on reception theory, see Jauss and Iser. On reader-response, see Fish. For an overview of key debates, see Tompkins.

broader context.) Butler's contemporary work, which engages with a global context (and is thus by necessity more actively historicizing), relies still more on this contingent aspect of the performative than her previous work, but it also allows for a degree of pragmatism that supports the approach I am advocating here. (Indeed, when faced with the contingency of narrative meaning, of gender, and of the human, it might be argued that one can only act pragmatically.) In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler focuses her discussion on this question of the human and proposes what I have characterized as a pragmatic politics:

[T]o call for social transformations in the name of women, we must also be part of a critical democratic project. Moreover, the category of women has been used differentially and with exclusionary aims, and not all women have been included within its terms; women have not been fully incorporated not the human. Both categories are still in process, underway, unfulfilled, thus we do not yet know and cannot ever definitively know in what the human finally consists. This means that we must follow a double path in politics: we must use this language to assert an entitlement to conditions of life in ways that affirm the constitutive role of sexuality and gender in political life, and we must also subject our very categories to critical scrutiny. (37-38)

Beyond its implications for subjectivity, this point is a very useful one for literary criticism. The "double path" Butler proposes for a politics of performativity describes the spirit in which a responsible reader might put forward a reading without staking a claim to ultimate authority, revealing hidden depths, or probing the textual unconscious. To put forward an interpretation in the sense that to interpret is to contextualize, to propose a contextual link (between a narrative "part" and its whole *or* between a narrative and its historical and cultural contexts), is necessarily selective and—as such—inherently entails a disavowal. However, although the outcome of an interpretive encounter between reader and text is unknowable in advance, this does not mean that we should cease to interpret, but that the frames

(political, rhetorical, etc.) through which we inevitably structure our understanding of that encounter in the construction of a reading warrant the “critical scrutiny” Butler describes.

To consider the point from another angle, contemporary feminist (and interdisciplinary) appropriations of performativity like Butler’s negotiate material reality and representation in a way that provides a model for the negotiation of text and context, between the material fact of the narrative (its fictionality, for Walsh) and the interpretations (“inside” and “outside”) it inspires. In a sense, texts are performative like bodies are performative. They are interpreted and acted upon externally *as* they act and interpret. As Butler puts it, the body can be “the site where ‘doing’ and ‘being done to’ become equivocal” (*Undoing Gender* 21). Performative theories of gender and the body can thus inform a theorization of the text: performativity holds the bodily/material (performance) and the symbolic/represented (the hypostasized/imagined performed) just as a text negotiates the material reality of its existence, the fact of its texthood, its status as representation, against the hypostasized represented, symbolic function of the text, interpretations “performed” upon it.

In tracking the complexly innovative referentiality of the Lizzie Borden version over decades, one requires a mechanism for interpreting not only those elements that appear to “deviate” from earlier versions, but those that are reprised, as well. One contemporary reworking of performativity is particularly useful in this context: Freeman’s concept of “temporal drag” (728), which opens up a potential for resistance in not only the forward-versioning of the Lizzie Borden phenomenon but in its inevitable, simultaneous backwards-orientation. Within Freeman’s reading, Butler “provide[s] a way of thinking about identity relationally across time, of ‘drag’

as a *productive* obstacle to progress, a usefully distorting pull backwards, and a necessary pressure upon the present tense” (729).²¹ This is a useful way to conceptualize the individual Lizzie Borden version, in all its traces of temporality. “Temporal drag” accounts for the “reverting” versions seem to perform, beyond the interpretation of such reverting as a necessarily “unprogressive,” mechanical repetition of an origin-less copy. In particular, Freeman notes that

Both [allegory and ritual] engage with *temporal* crossing, with the movement of signs, personified as bodies, across the boundaries of age, chronology, epoch. [...] [I]f I renounce my mother and wear her body as my “own” gender, I certainly don’t wear it as *she* did at the moment of my renunciation, circa 1969. If I disseminate my mother’s body in all its anachronistic glory onto the surface of my own, though, I don’t look normative at all. As “Mom, circa 1969,” my appearance writes onto my body not only the history of my love for my mother (or even the spending of her youthful body on the making of my own), but also at least two historically distinct forms and meanings of “womanhood.” This kind of temporal drag uses disruptive anachronisms to pivot what would otherwise be simple parody into a montage of publicly intelligible subject-positions lost and gained. (733)

Freeman’s understanding of “temporal drag” thus provides an explanation for the way in which Lizzie Borden versions seem to “accumulate” cultural baggage, even as they simultaneously seem to (re)invent the elements they narrate. Suggestions of madness in 1975 made-for-TV movie *The Legend of Lizzie Borden*, for example, are partly an anachronistic (re)contextualization of the infantilization of the Lizzie figure by contemporaneous news sources and true-crime narratives, as well as the Lizzie Borden nursery rhyme, and other renderings. In this sense, *Legend* may be understood to “wear” the defunct signifier of the infantilized Lizzie in a way that not only subverts the normative function of that signifier in the given version by representing it in a context in which it necessarily means differently, but that

²¹ Culler sees this in queer performativity, too: “It is this historical dimension of performatives that implies the possibility of deflecting or redirecting the weight of the past” (*The Literary in Theory* 160).

simultaneously subverts the perceived normativity of the original incarnation in *its* thereby exposed contextual contingency. Just as Freeman reflects on the non-normative function of “Mom 1969” when donned as a contemporary female identity, a Lizzie Borden version wearing a tired out construct in a new context is likewise “self-disrupted” by its own “anachronism,” which is particularly meaningful for the representation of a violent woman, whose expression in discourse is always already self-deconstructive (as I will discuss in greater detail to follow).²² When the “cultural corpse” of a defunct Lizzie-Borden signifier is “reanimated” by a Lizzie Borden version, it functions as a symbol of the “constructedness” of the story’s narrative past (earlier versions) as well as asserting and affirming the contingency of the present version. A Lizzie Borden version, in offering an ostensible manipulation of a pre-existent story, thus draws attention to its own contextual-situatedness, inviting (re)contextualization precisely *through* and *because of its* recontextualization of “the” story itself. To extrapolate beyond Lizzies: the subversive potential of temporal drag lies in its enabling of the possibility of a reading strategy following Butler’s “double path,” a mode of interpreting that is simultaneously constructive (of narrative meaning, of contextual connections) and a form of critique, a way of maintaining the “critical scrutiny” of interpretive frames Butler rightly advocates.

A concept of performativity thus adapted (via Freeman and recent work by Butler) provides an apposite complement to the narratological framework outlined in the first part of this introduction. How can we justify or explain theoretically the application of performativity, as emerging from Butler’s contemporary politics

²² Conceived thus, performativity provides a framework for interpreting the way performativity itself, as an interpretive tool, can accommodate its own terminological baggage, “donning” its vexed and often contradictory, distinct and overlapping narratological and cultural heritages as part of its deconstructive analytical force.

(which go beyond gender theory²³) to contemporary literary criticism, which demands a certain loyalty to the origins of the concept in speech act theory (or else risks dismissal or—worse—condemnation by narratologists around the world)?

Culler provides a useful interpretation of this possibility, proposing that the *differences* between Austin-inspired and Butler-inspired applications of performativity can actually themselves provide the basis for a concept of performativity useful to literary criticism. Indeed, for Culler, its “legacy of reconfiguration, despite”—or, I would argue, because of—“its divergences (Derrida and de Man, for instance, stress rather different aspects of the problem of the performative), enables us to address key problems in literary and cultural studies” (*Literary in Theory* 164).

Culler notes that one such useful difference between Austin’s and Butler’s concepts of the performative is the focus of the former upon singular acts and the latter upon complex repetition. “But,” he notes:

this apparent difference between two sorts of acts brings us back to the problem of the nature of the literary event [...] On the one hand, the literary work seems to accomplish a singular, specific act. It creates that reality that is the work, and its sentences accomplish something in particular in that work. For each work, one can try to specify what it and its parts accomplish [...] This, one might say, is the Austinian version of the literary event.

But on the other hand, thinking of Butler’s model, we could say that a work succeeds, becomes an event, by a massive repetition that takes up norms and, possibly, changes things. If a novel happens, it does so because, in its singularity, it inspires a passion that gives life to these forms, in acts of reading and recollection, repeating its inflection of the conventions of the novel and, perhaps, effecting an alteration in the norms or the forms through which readers go on to confront the world [and literature thereafter]. A poem may very well disappear without a trace, but it may also trace itself in memories and

²³ In their introduction to *Judith Butler and Political Theory*, Chambers and Carver emphasize that their project is to explore Judith Butler as a “political thinker” in general, not only as a gender theorist: “[W]e will first explore Gender Trouble; this means investigating its impact and accounting for its radical nature, but it also means considering the ways in which that very impact has dampened and sometimes hidden Butler’s broader contributions to political theory” (2).

give rise to acts of repetition. Its performativity, then, is less a singular act accomplished once and for all than a repetition that gives life to forms that it repeats. (*Literary in Theory* 162-163)

This is a brilliant negotiation of the two concepts of the performative in a way that locates in their complicated difference a parallel for the “double logic” of narrative (as manifest in literature). The complexity of gender in relation to acts motivates the theorization of the performative Butler offers, and the strengthened theory can be turned to shed light back on literature, equally complex (and also gendered), beyond Austin’s treatment of singular acts (albeit, as Derrida notes, citational ones).

Literature, as Culler aptly argues, cannot be understood in terms of singular acts. “Butler’s model helps us—although this is in no way her goal—to conceive of this unusual performativity that interrogates by repeating foundational acts—in a repetition that can have critical value, as it animates and alters forms that it repeats” (*Literary in Theory* 163). This approach is directly applicable to the Lizzie Borden phenomenon, which indeed “animates and alters,” that which it repeats, by means of the contingent forward progress of the versioning phenomenon, in all its paradoxical temporal drag.

A study of the Lizzie Borden versions is particularly suited to illuminate narrative and performative theoretical concerns (and vice versa) because rarely is the interrelationship between the cultural and the narrative, the symbolic and the material, the historical and the formal more vexed, more exposed in all its complexity, than in the representation of violent women. The study of female violence is a major area of research, and scholars bring an enormous range of perspectives to the consideration of what women who kill mean, historically, socially, politically, economically, and otherwise. Many of the most useful analyses for our purposes focus on the challenge female violence poses to representation.

Particularly useful in this regard are Ann Jones's aforementioned *Women Who Kill*, Lynda Hart's *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression*, and Helen Birch's *Moving Targets: Women, Murder and Representation*, to name a few. It is useful to think of female violence as existing at exactly the nexus of narrative and culture that this thesis explores, and it thus calls into question the very bases for our understanding of each. To put it another way, more specifically, women murderers present a disruption of the social order that both invites and defies representation in culture and in narrative, and it thereby exposes fascinating and revelatory disjuncts and overlaps in the terms and concepts through which we interpret each.

That narrative *seems* to both endeavour and to fail to contain the cultural disturbance produced by an act of female violence is a phenomenon widely noted by investigators of female violence in relation to the legal, media and literary arenas, and it is often considered primarily within a psychoanalytic frame. Belinda Morrissey offers a reading of female murder in legal and media discourses in the context of an uncontainable cultural trauma: "The mainstream media and legal discourses' attempts to narrate, understand and resolve events such as murders performed by women only make evidence the impossibility of the coherent and seamless account of reality for which they strive" (2-3). Morrissey focuses on the revealing desperation of narrative attempts to construct subjectivities for female murderers and the resultant "persistent denials of female agency" (29). More recently, Hilary Neroni has demonstrated a similar effect in her analysis of filmic representations of women who kill (*The Violent Woman: Femininity, Narrative and Violence in Contemporary American Cinema*). This phenomenon of narrative

breakdown has even been observed in relation to Lizzie Borden, specifically.

Kathleen Chamberlain writes of a Lizzie-allusive dime novel from 1893:

The textual assertions and counterassertions of “Dash Dare” deconstruct to illustrate the unreliability of cultural and textual depictions of reality. [Author of the dime novel Edward] Stratemeyer created a more culturally acceptable accused woman and a more acceptable murderer to counteract the danger posed by Lizzie Borden's possible guilt, yet the implausibility of his plot undermines his construction of reality. (189)

This widely noted self-deconstruction is a phenomenon that underlies all of the case studies to follow, but I will interpret it not, as Morrissey and Neroni might, as the involuntary repetition of a collectively repressed, shared cultural trauma, but rather in relation to an attribute of narrative itself (in relation to which—as discussed in detail above—I have sought to present an alternative to the psychoanalytic metaphor for contextual reading). Female violence does seem to launch narrative production into a sort of overdrive, but not because personified texts (or their authors) seek to bury the violence in their (or our) imagined unconscious; indeed, both violence and efforts to neutralize it through containment within a narrative structure occur plainly on what Best and Marcus might call the “surface” of the text, through its formal and thematic features. What texts do to female violence is contextualize it, in a specific narrative, in a text, in a genre, in relation to characters, to setting, to represented historical and cultural factors, etc. Crucially, how the represented violence relates to the contexts in which it is represented is subject to the judgment of an interpreter, whose performative reading is both absolutely contingent and contextually-constrained, bounded and unbounded in ways interpretable only from the “outside,” by another interpreter, and so on and so forth. This point of contingency is exactly where textual meaning (and thus possible resistance) is located. We must thus, as Butler urges, “look *both* for the conditions by which the

object field is constituted, and for *the limits* of those conditions. The limits are to be found where the reproducibility of the conditions is not secure, the site where conditions are contingent, transformable” (*Undoing Gender* 27).

Judith Butler notes this potentially infinite chain of contextualization in *Excitable Speech*, linking it to the possibility of transformation:

The “illimitability” of context simply means that any delineation of a context that one might perform is itself subject to a further contextualization, and that contexts are not given in unitary forms. This does not mean, and never meant, that one should cease any effort to delineate a context; it means only that any such delineation is subject to a potentially infinite revision (147-148) [...] Derrida’s formulation offers a way to think performativity in relation to transformation, to the break with prior contexts, with the possibility of inaugurating contexts yet to come. (152)

It is the fact of this infinite potential for new interpretations as (re)contextualizations, each of which in itself is necessarily bounded by the contextual circumstances of the interpreter (who, after all, exists only to the extent she is perceived as such by her own interpreters, and so on forever), that enables the necessary break from the voluntarism/determinism problem for which earlier versions of performativity were criticized. This is the context in which I will approach the phenomenon of Lizzie Borden versioning. My readings consider the way in which texts emerge from changing cultural contexts to re-contextualize the murders, not as a culturally transcendent story, but as always already in a state of becoming.

While the case studies to follow consider texts in contexts, in various ways, they also present in themselves, collectively, a new context for the texts they examine. While some have been examined (in more or less depth) in relation to the historical Lizzie Borden, few have been considered in any great depth in relation to the Lizzie Borden fictional archive as a whole. Bringing Freeman and de Mille together through their shared allusion to Lizzie, for example, sheds new light on

both, and (I would argue) substantiates readings of each as allusive and “allegorical” (in the broadest sense). In short, the project consists partly in the (re)contextualization of an under-examined archive within a new narratological and cultural framework it simultaneously subjects to critical scrutiny.

Returning to the question I posed at the beginning of this introduction, then: is this really a narrative project, or is it a cultural one? The answer is that it is a contemporary literary-critical project, and as such, it can be both. The cultural aspects of this thesis are inextricably linked to its narrative aspects, and that is part of its point. In its feminism and its approach to narrative, it is rhetorical and pragmatic and adopts as its conceptual model a revised, historicised performativity emphasising the direct role of context in the production of narrative and cultural meaning, offering textual interpretations in full awareness of the simultaneous contingency and contextual-situatedness of interpretation.

I am not the first to identify the Lizzie Borden fictional archive. Robert A. Flynn compiled an extensive annotated bibliography of non-fictional and fictional sources in 1992. This was supplemented by Lisa Zawadzki, whose version is collected in *The Proceedings of the 1992 Lizzie Borden Conference*.

Lizzieandrewborden.com offers a still more extensive listing, as does blogger Faye Musselman (“Tattered Fabric”). Wikipedia.org lists numerous additional versions, references, and mentions of the case.

More detailed treatments of the fictional archive as a whole are Anne Schofield’s 1993 article, “Lizzie Borden Took an Axe: Feminism, History and American Culture,” and Schalow’s 1995 doctoral thesis, *Our Beloved Lizzie*:

Constructing an American Legend.²⁴ Schofield considers the attraction of the Lizzie Borden story to America as a cultural myth and examines a selection of versions in relation to the categories of “romance” and “feminist quest.”²⁵ Schalow’s thesis offers an analysis of representations of Lizzie Borden in historical documents, in newspapers, and in some fictional sources, as well.²⁶ Although these are the only significant dedicated treatments, authors working on peripheral subjects often note the existence of the archive in a detailed footnote.²⁷ Indeed, there seems to be a desire to bibliographize when it comes to Lizzie Borden, perhaps stemming from the desire with which I struggle in Part I of this introduction: to somehow grasp a “true” Lizzie Borden narrative through her collective representations. Unlike any previous in-depth study, my approach to the Lizzie Borden fictional archive is organized chronologically rather than by genre, theme, or subjective typological criteria. The chronological organization of this project enables the illumination of changes in the

²⁴ For a study focused on plays about the Borden murders, see Webster.

²⁵ Schofield identifies the Lizzie Borden archive as worthy of examination and notes its tendency to accumulate cultural baggage (which she observes in the context of the story’s “myth”-like status [92]). She notes ways in which versions appear to be shaped by “political agenda[s]” and argues, rightly, for “the ‘usefulness’ of gender as an analytic tool” in examining “the meaning and development of the Borden myth” (100). Her typology, however, is not helpful for the purposes of this thesis, because despite her interest in the incarnation of the “myth” in different contexts over time, her typological approach focuses on (creates) commonalities between versions rather than emphasising their difference. Also, because Schofield only took account of a limited number of versions, her dualist understanding of the versioning phenomenon fails to describe versions she did not include in her analysis.

²⁶ Schalow’s 1992 doctoral thesis is important to acknowledge in slightly greater detail because she not only addresses the “Lizzie phenomenon,” the archive of Lizzie Borden texts as a whole, but because she does so from a perspective that acknowledges both narrative and cultural implications on the construction of the legend in its various incarnations and often draws upon gender criticism. In her narrative perspective, however, she focuses mainly on genre, reliability, “heteroglossia” and what she describes as the “unfinalizability...of the individual in the novel” (19), and her application of narrative theory is inconsistent. She applies her understanding of Mikhail Bakhtin to her approach to cultural criticism, which focuses on “representations of character” and the ethical implications of the case in its popularity. Although her approach is broadly literary, though, she devotes two of her three critical chapters to historical and news media representations of the case. Only in her final chapter does she consider the fictional Lizzies, which literature is of interest to her “in terms of how it variously represents Lizzie and also negotiates the boundaries and slippages of art, popular culture, and criminal transgression” (101). Her organisation is by genre rather than chronology, her references to cultural contexts frequent but general. Overall, her exploration of Lizzie Borden fiction can be understood as a critical survey up to 1992, and it is useful (particularly from a bibliographic standpoint) predominantly as such.

²⁷ See, for instance, Roggenkamp 155.

Lizzie Borden construct over time and in direct relation to changing cultural contexts. The primary texts chosen for each chapter are not intended to stand as representative of Lizzie Borden versions of their respective eras. (To posit them as such would undermine the nuance and individual difference between contemporaneous versions crucial to this project's understanding of culture and its corresponding problematization of uncomplicated concepts of the relationship between texts and contexts.) Rather, they were chosen for what I perceived to be the strength of their textual resonances with cultural contexts and for the narratological or cultural issues they serve to illuminate, complicate or disrupt. (In some cases, I also took into evaluative consideration the impact of a given version on the archive more broadly or on popular conceptions of Lizzie Borden, in general.) Often the chosen texts emerge from contexts of particular cultural complexity, amid deeply conflicting cultural forces or within ambiguous moments in uncertain histories. Together, the versions present a rich, challenging archive with enormous potential for a contemporary literary-critical project.

Chapter One: “Almost Abnormal”: Re-Contextualizing (the Absurd Phallus in) Mary Wilkins Freeman’s (and J. Edgar Chamberlin’s) “The Long Arm”

In this chapter, I examine Mary Wilkins Freeman’s and Joseph Edgar Chamberlin’s short story “The Long Arm” to demonstrate the political stakes of interpretation as the selective construction of contextual links, either between the narrative facets of a text and its perceived whole or between a text itself and its various perceived contexts. Freeman’s 1895 story provides an enlightening example because, as the pages to follow explore, it exists at the most complex intersection of authorial, biographical, reception, historical, political, social, sexual, criminological, narrative, literary, and critical contexts one could possibly concoct. My project here is to revel in the tensions with which Freeman’s story is rife: “internal” contradictions (between or within characters, between or within plot elements, contradictions that undermine narrative coherence, etc.) and “external” contradictions (or seeming contradictions) between text and context (adherence to and rejection of generic conventions, apparent endorsement/rejection of perceived normative social roles, and so on). Indeed, “The Long Arm” provides ample fodder for such an exploration of narrative/cultural tensions. In terms of Freeman’s documented authorial choices and the text’s relation to documented professional trends; Freeman’s personal life; the contemporaneous reception of the text; the historical, political, social and sexual contexts whence the story emerged; its narrative aspects; its relation to literary trends; and its critical life in the decades since its publication; there is everywhere, incontrovertibly, ambivalence. Ambivalence, uncertainty, ambiguity, contradiction, paradox, and—indeed, as Valerie Rohy observes—“mystery” (Rohy 103). This particular text-in-context

reveals on every “level” of analysis a certain liminal status, the “almost” emphasized in the title of this chapter. As a result, crucially, it creates a situation in which an extreme variety of interpretations are put forward as potentially valid, and in which it is very difficult to put forward any one interpretation as authoritative.²⁸

This chapter will suggest that immense interpretive and political possibility is made available by the very critical circumstances of virtually irreducible uncertainty. Critiques of Butler’s recent work might ask, “What does it mean to make political assertions or claims in a context in which one is aware that any avowal entails an implicit disavowal?” On a literary-critical level, this question might read, “What does it mean to advance an interpretation in full awareness of the contingency of interpretive selectivity?” The answer for literary criticism is—as Butler’s contemporary politics demand—the subjection of the very categories through which interpretive frames are constructed to the most informed possible critical scrutiny alongside the continuing creation of new textual meaning by means of the best possible tools available, as simultaneously enabled and constrained by the contextual situation of the interpreter.

First, I will illustrate how certain contextual resonances that conventionally serve to illuminate textual meaning serve instead in the case of Freeman’s “The Long Arm” serve to confound the quest for understanding. Then, I will consider

²⁸ ...and speaking of questionable authority: Charles Johanningsmeier argues that scholars of “The Long Arm” rarely acknowledge the story’s original newspaper publication and cite later reprints (which he notes differ subtly from the original texts) without historical (or even rhetorical) justification. He suggests as the ideal ur-text the actual proofs originally submitted to the papers by Chamberlin (a tall order) and as second best the *Pocket Magazine* version. In the spirit of rectifying what Johanningsmeier identifies in the arbitrary selection of previous scholars as inattention to the history of the text’s material production, I use for the purpose of this chapter the *Pocket Magazine* version. At the time of his article, Johanningsmeier had only identified three of the numerous papers in which the story appeared in August of 1895 (*Utica* [NY] *Daily Observer*, the *Austin* [TX] *Daily Statesman*, and the *New York Herald*) (“Current State”). I am quite pleased to add to that list (which nonetheless remains to be exhausted) *The Omaha Daily Bee*, the *Kansas City Star*, and *The Springfield Republican*.

metacritically the impact of the story's indeterminacy on interpreters. Finally, I will subject to critical scrutiny the possible Lizzie Borden connection alongside competing alleged allusions—in particular, the oft-proposed link to the contemporaneous murder of Freda Ward by her lover Alice Mitchell—to inform an interpretation of the text inspired by what Sharon Marcus calls “just reading,”²⁹ addressing several interesting and thus far overlooked critical points. I will argue that the story's liminal contextual positioning and thematic focus on liminality, which emerges in part through its allusion to the Borden murders, support an ironic reading of the story wherein the phallic symbolism of Phoebe's long arm does not enact but rather serves a parody of the conflation of sexual “deviance” and violence perpetrated by contemporaneous media representations (like that of the Alice Mitchell case).

At the start of “The Long Arm,” the first-person narrator, engaged 29-year-old Sarah Fairbanks, has just been acquitted of the murder of her widower father. Prior to the murders, Sarah's father had forbidden her to marry her boyfriend Henry

²⁹ “Just reading” is the antecedent of “surface reading” that Sharon Marcus proposes in relation to British, nineteenth-century representations of female partnerships in *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*. The application of a “just reading” to Freeman's story is supported by Freeman's own attitude toward the work:

I am rather terrified at “The Long Arm” being taken so seriously, as I was rather terrified, although of course mightily pleased, at its taking the prize. It was written *more than* [sic] as an experiment than anything else, and because I was strongly urged by Mr. Bacheller, and Mr. Stedman. I had very little time, in fact my part of the work was done in less than three days, and probably Mr. Chamberlin's finishing work, influenced the decision largely in its favour. (Letter to Charles Wilcox, my emphasis)

Freeman's description, implying anything but hidden depth, certainly seems to call for “just reading.” On the other hand, “symptomatic” readers might identify Freeman's (or editor Kendrick's) accidental claim that the story was “more than” an experiment as a Freudian slip!

In another amusing remark quite compelling in this context, Freeman writes, “If I had been influenced I should have written very differently because most of my own work, is not really the kind I myself like. I want more symbolism, more mysticism. I left that out, because it struck me people did not want it, and I was forced to consider selling qualities” (Letter to Fred Lewis Patee). Did “The Long Arm” let a bit of experimental “symbolism” slip in, then, or is it all surface, as Freeman's quote might suggest? A question to bear in mind in relation to this chapter: What are the implications of considering authorial intentionality in ascertaining the “depth” at which it is appropriate to read a text?

Ellis, blocking the marriage by threat of disinheritance. Sarah vows to solve the mystery of her father's death, in the hopes of clearing her name, and the details of her quest appear in the form of her notes and journal entries. She admits that she is uncertain of her own innocence, however, and much of the evidence she relays invites readers to question her reliability. After a highly methodical and scientific but ultimately uninspired investigation by Sarah and the subsequent intervention of eccentric out-of-town detective (Henry's cousin, Francis Dix), the murders are discovered to have been committed by Sarah's neighbour Phœbe Dole, a domineering dressmaker. Phœbe was driven to murder with a pair of sewing shears by jealousy at the prospect of a proposed marriage between her lifelong domestic partner Maria Woods and Sarah's father Martin. "There are other ties as strong as the marriage one," Phœbe explains, "that are just as sacred" (Freeman "The Long Arm" 76). Phœbe had gained entry to Sarah's home and re-locked the door upon her departure by means of her previously unnoticed "almost abnormally long" arm (61). Sarah is now free to marry Henry; Phœbe is imprisoned and dies.

Taken "out of context," the story is relatively simple, if nonetheless it raises a number of questions. (How do narrative frames function in the story? Is the narrator reliable? How does the story construct the relationship between science and domesticity? What is the impact of the first-person narration? etc.) As soon as one acknowledges "external" context, though, the story becomes tantalizingly rich with possible symbolic or allegorical meaning. The turn of the century around which Freeman wrote "The Long Arm" was a maelstrom of cultural change, amid which gender and sexuality may be understood to have undergone a particularly complex transition. That "The Long Arm" relates to the cultural changes with which it is contemporaneous, and the collective anxieties by which they were accompanied,

seems extremely likely given its myriad “internal” and contextual tensions. In particular, the ambiguous representation of violence, sexuality and gender in the story seems significant in relation to Freeman’s broader oeuvre; to contemporaneous popular representations of violence; to women’s changing roles, identities and stereotypes in the late 1800s; and to the increasing stigmatization of female partnership with the development of “lesbian” as an identity category in the 1880s and 1890s. (As I will explore in greater detail, the relationship between these three overlapping cultural phenomena is as vexed and unknown as their intermingled allusion in Freeman’s story.)

Despite the subjectivity of historical clues as to authorial intent, they are nonetheless often taken as a starting point for a contextual analysis (and indeed, such information is an important resource for responsible interpreters). Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on one’s objective), the exact details of the story’s authorship (let alone its authors’ perceived intent) are unknown. Mary Wilkins Freeman and her friend, editor of *The Youth’s Companion* Joseph Edgar Chamberlin, wrote the story in collaboration, and the details of their respective contributions are not documented in great detail.

Critics often quote rather out of context one of Freeman’s very few explicit references to the partnership among her published letters, “[I] was forced to combine forces with somebody else in order to bring it about” (Letter to Arthur Stedman 1 May 1895). This somewhat surprising quote seems to appeal to feminist critics, who subtly frame it as an acknowledgment of the obstacles faced by women writers of the nineteenth century, as Freeman’s subtle lament regarding the collaboration and—by association—her reliance upon a man to produce a story in the conventionally male detective genre. (The quote also serves to support the characterization of Freeman as

very modest, an attribute very much in keeping with her widely reported conventional femininity.³⁰) In the context of the letter as a whole, though, which is addressed to Arthur Stedman, office manager of the Bachelier Syndicate, which hosted the detective fiction competition for which the story was produced, the tone is hardly one of feminist indignation (although—for better or for worse—it does affirm her modesty): “My dear Mr. Stedman,” she begins.

I have, after all, sent the detective story to Bachelier & Johnson, but was forced to combine forces with somebody else in order to bring it about. Mr. J. Edgar Chamberlin, wrote the story with me. It was simply impossible for me to complete anything so out of my usual vein in such a short time, in any other way. However, the story is undoubtedly much the better for it. Mr Chamberlin is the Listener on *The Boston Transcript*, and editor of *The Youth's Companion*. He does good work of his own, and the assistance which he could give me was just what I needed, He and his wife are great friends of mine, and I am in the habit of consulting them a deal, about my work. (1 May 1895)

“Forced to join forces” takes on quite a light-hearted connotation given the tone of the letter more broadly, especially given that Stedman and Bachelier had been “for a few months actively solicit[ing] an entry from Wilkins” (Johanningsmeier *Fiction* 81).³¹ Her desire for Chamberlin’s help is represented here as a happy convenience embraced as an opportunity for genuine improvement of her work. As she suggests, Freeman was indeed “in the habit of consulting” Chamberlin “a great deal.” In fact, Chamberlin’s copy of her novel *Pembroke* included the dedication, “To Joseph

³⁰ Darwin famously linked female modesty with passivity and limited sexual passion, and modesty was a highly significant aspect of turn-of-the-century sexologists’ understanding of female psychology and sexuality. (It features particularly prominently in the work of Havelock Ellis.) For a good overview of the changing cultural meaning of modesty, see “modesty” in *The Oxford Companion to the Body* (Douthwaite). For an analysis of the commonalities and differences between Darwin’s and Ellis’s understandings of modesty in relation to female sexuality, with specific relevance to a literary context, see Yeazell, especially the final chapter, “Modesty and Sex.”

For a brief reading of Freeman’s biography in relation to contemporaneous concepts of femininity, see Zandra A. Zagarell’s “Introduction” to *The New England Nun and Other Stories*, xv-xvi.

³¹ Charles Johanningsmeier even goes so far as to suggest they “probably arranged her victory” (*Fiction* 81), but I have not seen this suggestion elsewhere.

Edgar Chamberlin, / who saved the book from / Mary E. Wilkins” (Chamberlin). The tribute would seem to affirm Chamberlin’s active and presumably welcomed role in her writing while the somewhat whimsical tone of these lines simultaneously attests to a playful, jesting side of their relationship. Freeman’s note as to the potential “appeal” of the “joint authorship” of “The Long Arm” to her expected readers also suggests a perceived professional benefit deriving from the fact of the collaboration itself, in its “novelty,” a motivating factor often overlooked.³²

For his part, Chamberlin reports that Freeman invited him to collaborate on the story but that it was his idea to take the Lizzie Borden murders as the inspiration for it:

The circumstances of the writing of the story were as follows: Noticing the offer of the prize, Miss Wilkins said to me at my house, “Why don’t we together write a story and get that prize?” She was no doubt impelled to this proposition by the fact that I had had much experience in the editing and presenting of stories. I fell in with the idea, saying, “Let us invent a solution of the Borden murder.” The Borden trial, that of the daughter of a man murdered at Fall River, was a cause celebre of the time. We carried out this plan. The plot was for the most part of Miss Wilkins’s invention; the technical work of fitting it for the Bachelier Syndicate requirement was mine.³³
(Chamberlin)

Freeman implies that Chamberlin’s role may have been more substantial. She is certainly adamant in a later letter to Arthur Stedman (as in the one excerpted above) that Chamberlin be fully credited. “[Y]ou will be sure, will you not, please, that his name appears with mine and the fullest credit is given him? I should feel very badly, otherwise, because he really does deserve it” (16 June 1895).

³² Johanningsmeier offers a useful consideration of Freeman’s business sense in “Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary E. Wilkins (Freeman): Two Shrewd Businesswomen in Search of New Markets.”

³³ Kendrick also credits Chamberlin with the story’s title, a replacement for that which Freeman had proposed: “The Story of Sarah Tompkins” (Kendrick 122). Charles E. L. Wingate also reports that the title was Chamberlin’s suggestion (123).

If one approaches existing criticism regarding the nature of the collaboration—about which there is, on the whole, little evidence—performatively (attuned to the interpretive frames through which previous readings have been filtered), competing motivations are revealed. First, there is something stereotypically, even adorably Victorian (and thus suspect) about the notion of the two authors deferring politely to one another, a conception that serves to downplay the unromantic notion of authors strategically pooling forces for material gains. In fact, the prize was split 50:50 and despite Freeman’s pleas, Chamberlin’s name was often omitted from printings.³⁴ For feminist purposes, the collaboration can be presented in a number of different ways. On the one hand, it may seem worthwhile to downplay Chamberlin’s possible participation, since it is undocumented and allows for the story to be “claimed” on Freeman’s behalf, reducing Chamberlin’s role to title-editor and assistant by name only. Within this reading, Freeman takes advantage of her friend’s masculine privilege for personal gain, a subversive idea. On the other hand, the fact that the story was written collaboratively at least leaves open the possibility that—given some of its less progressive possible interpretations—the story might not be saying exactly what Freeman might have intended it to say. That the few facts regarding the nature of the collaboration can be so readily manipulated to serve contradictory ends emphasizes the political consequences of a determined-in-advanced agenda for literary interpretation. Approaching the issue of authorship performatively, as I have here, entails subjecting to critical scrutiny the frames (here, a feminist political approach) whereby interpretations have been shaped in the past,

³⁴ Chamberlin also notes that the story “was pirated in England and put forth there without my name. Of course I received one half of the prize. The story was lately included in a collection of detective stories made by Carolyn Wells, and this time also without my name. This dropping of my name led Mrs. Freeman to send Miss Wells a very indignant letter, a copy of which she sent to me” (Chamberlin).

opening up new possibilities for interpretation and reveals the complex motivations and prejudices through which text/context links are constructed.

Issues of authorial intent are also complicated by the relation of the story to its position in Freeman's career. It emerges at a time when Freeman was known to be negotiating her aesthetic concerns with commercial ones.³⁵ The contest both offered the possibility for significant financial gains and enabled Freeman to experiment with genre and form as was her wont at the time, in a way she might not otherwise have been inclined to do.³⁶ It also both typifies the rural New England setting for which Freeman had become famous and—in its situation in the detective genre—shows Freeman branching out from the “local colour” sketches of New England life for which she was previously known; by doing so, she was responding to the demands of her readers who wanted to see more, whose pressures would ultimately lead to her authorship of novels often regarded as inferior to her shorter work.³⁷ Indeed, in a sense, “The Long Arm” emerges in a liminal moment in Freeman's career that can be interpreted both as the height of her success and the brink of her decline.³⁸ Mary Reichardt notes that “After 1895, as [Freeman] increasingly experimented with other genres and styles, her writing began to have much more of the ‘air of the marketplace’ about it; the sheer quantity of the work itself indicates an inevitable corresponding sacrifice of quality or at least an overall unevenness” (*Web*

³⁵ See, again, Johannaningsmeier “Sarah Orne Jewett.”

³⁶ Mary Reichardt describes the formal and generic experiments that interested Freeman around this time in her career in the “Introduction” to the *Mary Wilkins Freeman Reader* (xiii).

³⁷ Reichardt notes, for example, that “Freeman's novels, however, are a disappointment to anyone turning directly to them from her early stories. As is quickly apparent (and in many ways quite natural), she was not able to sustain the salient features of her singular style—compression, unobtrusive narration, laconic dialogue, intense unity of action—in a form that by definition required a degree of diffusion and verbosity” (*Web* 36).

³⁸ For an interpretation of the decline of Freeman's popularity in her lifetime, see Reichardt *Web* 38-42. For an interpretation of the continuing decline after her death, see Kendrick 4-7, in which the author considers the question, “After Freeman's death in 1930, why did her reputation fall into a decline that would not begin to be reversed until the late 1950s?” (4).

42). The text of “The Long Arm” itself, likewise, might be interpreted as featuring, on the one hand, the best of her Freeman’s beloved New England realism and, on the other hand, hints of the “stilted inversions of normal English word order” for which Westbrook criticises her later work (Westbrook 83).

A turn to the contemporaneous reception of the text does little to clarify the uncertainties outlined in relation to the author’s perceived intentions. First of all, the story was not universally acclaimed. Although it won the prize for the competition for which it was written, many questioned the judgment. One critic remarked, “To my mind it has not a hundredth part of the cleverness of either of her two volumes of short stories” (“The Lounger”). Others were more positive, such as this reviewer, who remarks, “It is an extremely good story, told with reticence, yet with a certain amount of that capacity to make the flesh creep so essential in work of this kind” (“Novels”). Conflicting value judgments aside, though, no reviewer offers any clear clue to the perceived cultural meaning of the text as received in its time. Indeed, there are no references to the portrayal of female partnership in the story (although the more glowing reviewer quoted above thought its representation of Phœbe’s motive a “weakness” of the story). Certainly no reviewer mentions Alice Mitchell, although the Lizzie Borden connection is noted. Overall, one garners no sense at all of the broad cultural trends surrounding the perception of female sexuality to which the story is routinely linked through an examination of its contemporaneous reviews.

The text represents a liminal year for Freeman personally, too, in that she may retrospectively be understood as (and may indeed have felt herself) on the brink of a significant transition from life with the family of her longtime friend Mary John Wales and courtship by future husband Charles Freeman. Mary Wilkins Freeman

had been living with Wales, with whom she is reported to have had a very close relationship some scholars have interpreted in the context of lesbian ties, since 1883.

In 1892 or 1893, Freeman was introduced to Charles Freeman, a dismissed Medical Examiner of rebel character and questionable repute (Glasser 157), to whom she would become engaged in 1897. Leah Blatt Glasser cites as evidence of Freeman's extreme ambivalence toward the marriage newspaper reports recording the startlingly numerous delays of the wedding date. She quotes *The New York Telegraph* in its observation that, "the public is really tired of the love affairs of the literary old maid, and the sooner she marries the doctor and takes him out of the public view the more highly will the action be appreciated" (Glasser 158). Indeed, they did not marry until 1902, and the marriage was a disastrous failure culminating in Charles's commitment to a mental institution, his later escape, and his final disinheritance of Freeman and other close family in a controversial will made shortly before his death.

In 1895, two years before the engagement of the pair, by which point the marriage had quite possibly already been proposed, Freeman was very likely experiencing anxieties and uncertainties about her long-sustained relationship with Wales ("romantic," sexual or not) and the prospect of its diminution through her marriage. That these anxieties may have influenced Freeman's writing is widely (almost universally) observed by critics, as Freeman's characters often face "choices" between close female friendships and marriage, with various outcomes.

While the influence of her uncertain marital status on Freeman at the time of writing "The Long Arm" is quite compelling, however, it does little to *clarify* the meaning of the story. Indeed, the positioning of the story in relation to such a vexed biographical moment only creates a further proliferation of possible interpretations.

One tempting avenue of interpretation would be to assume that Freeman might have identified herself or Mary Wales with one or more of the characters in “The Long Arm”, but such an approach quickly becomes unwieldy. Some critics have suggested Freeman at times felt dominated by Wales (Reichardt *Web* 105), which would place her in the position of the vulnerable Maria, but her role as provider for the household (she often supported Wales with her royalties) aligns her more with Phoebe. Sarah’s complicated conventional femininity also parallels Freeman’s own. Such ambiguous and overlapping parallels undermine clear biographical resonances, reflecting a complicated text/context relationship.

Freeman’s relationship with Mary Wales is rendered both more significant and less clear by the complex cultural contexts surrounding the story. As I have begun to suggest, “The Long Arm”’s ambiguities are often linked to cultural changes surrounding gender and sexuality because the story (re)presents female violence and female partnership in a cultural moment at the temporal focus of debates surrounding the history of “lesbian sexuality.” The 1890s play a determining and equally uncertain role in each of (at least) two competing versions of that history, both of which “The Long Arm” has helped to construct while its meaning has simultaneously been (re)constituted in and through them.

At the heart of the discrepancy between the two versions is the perceived performativity of the media, literature and sexologists like Havelock Ellis and Richard von Kraft-Ebing in pathologizing female sexuality: Do contemporaneous developments regarding the new kinds of popular culture, media, literary and sexological materials representing female sexuality (in general, and lesbian sexuality in particular) as deviant during this period record a change in the status of the “woman” construct and the perception of same-sex love that happened *prior to* or

independent of its representation in media and sexological discourses? Or did those discourses construct it themselves? While all cultural meaning is produced by complex processes that undermine the answerability of such questions, the cultural status of “woman” and of female “friendships” in 1895 (and/or Mary Wilkins Freeman’s perception thereof) seems an important context for an understanding of the story even on its most literal level.

In brief, the two competing histories of lesbian sexuality can be understood as follows: In the first, female partnerships posited as the antecedents to contemporary lesbian relationships were once considered socially acceptable, and it was only around the 1880s and 1890s that female friendship came to be understood as a meaningful threat to patriarchy and thus the new “lesbian” construct targeted by popular, media, and sexological discourse for pathologization and stigmatization. The most significant proponent of this theory was Carol Smith-Rosenberg, who in her 1975 *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* devoted a chapter to “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” in which she suggests that “eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women routinely formed emotional ties with other women,” and that “such deeply felt same-sex friendships were casually accepted in American society [...] through the mid-nineteenth century” (53). Lillian Faderman’s influential *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* and her later *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Sexuality* also drew heavily upon and helped to develop this theory of a “golden age” of “romantic friendship” between women (variously defined as monogamous, marital, sexual, or otherwise by different scholars). Marilyn Diggs in her overview of this history notes that after Faderman, “the acceptability of

‘romantic friendship’ before the twentieth century became a scholarly ‘given’” (213).

Marcus observes that both Smith-Rosenberg and Faderman both draw upon Adrienne Rich’s “continuum” concept of lesbian sexuality (Marcus 10), which sought to “deepen and broaden the range of what we define as lesbian existence” (Rich 27) in order to

connect aspects of woman identification as diverse as the impudent, intimate girl-friendships of eight-or nine-year olds and the banding together of those women of the twelfth and fifteenth centuries known as Beguines [...] to connect these women with the more celebrated “Lesbians” of the women’s school around Sappho of the seventh century B.C.; with the secret sororities and economic networks reported among African women; and with the Chinese marriage resistance sisterhoods—communities of women who refused marriage, or who if married often refused to consummate their marriages [...]

...and so on and so forth (Rich 27-28). For scholars of the history of lesbian sexuality, the continuum concept obscures the ambiguity surrounding the sexual nature of the bonds Smith-Rosenberg and Faderman view as anticipating modern lesbianism.

In the other version of this history, female partnerships are held to have always been a site of contesting cultural meanings, never “casually accepted” as in the “Golden Age” hypothesis offered by Faderman and adopted by many scholars to date, but always already a battleground of conflicting identities. Those espousing what Marcus calls the “minority thesis” emphasize lesbians’ continuing ostracism, while often retaining a continuum concept of lesbian sexuality enabling cross-historical identification. Proponents of this theory note that “some nineteenth-century Americans and Europeans” already “[saw] women’s bonds as deviant and pathological,” prior to what earlier “romantic friendship” scholars had identified as

the turn-of-the-century onset of such trends (Marcus 10). As Diggs argues, “Far from a presexological world in which women’s intimacies were encouraged by a culture that perceived women to be innocent of sexuality, the nineteenth century was a period of contentious struggle over the definition and representation of a lesbian sexuality” (215). The two competing versions of lesbian sexuality are sprung from historically specific conflicts within feminism and within broader debates surrounding subjectivity and identity in the 1980s and 1990s, where they were deployed for different kinds of political claims.³⁹

In a recent study, Marcus concludes that both the romantic friendship and the “minority thesis” narratives of “lesbian sexuality” are too tidy. Neither were “romantic friendships” “causally accepted” nor trans-historically condemned. Both the “Golden Age” and minority theses fail to allow for the meaningfully varied experience of women in the nineteenth century (and beyond). Women’s relationships and the social norms against and through which they were and are understood are far more “elastic” than previous models have accounted for. Women engaged in a wide range of same-sex social and sexual practice in a variety of social contexts, and were met with a variety of social responses, even within a given cultural moment. Given this compelling “elasticity” identified by Marcus, pinning down the sexual and gender politics of Freeman’s “The Long Arm” seems more difficult than ever.

In this context, we might view the tendency to link “The Long Arm” to the Alice Mitchell story as a symptom of the now fairly debunked romantic friendship thesis. If the 1890s marked a shocking and rapid transformation from the “golden age” of socially accepted female “romantic friendship” to the age of lesbian insanity,

³⁹ Diggs briefly but effectively contextualizes these versions in relation to the history of academic feminism (213-215).

criminality, deviance and monstrosity, then it might quite reasonably be argued that this cultural change and—to the extent the Alice Mitchell trial and related news reports may be understood as a precedent in or influential example of this kind of public discourse—the Alice Mitchell case, in particular, may very well have influenced Freeman quite directly. However, given what seems more likely, that same-sex love faced complex and constantly changing attitudes, and the changes in the 1890s were *not* the rather black-and-white transformation adherents of the romantic friendship thesis have alleged, then it is unlikely Freeman was influenced by the very particular context of the Alice Mitchell trial, but by more gradual shifts in popular and academic thought—an argument supported by the comparative weakness of the Alice Mitchell connection given its prevalent evocation, as this chapter will reveal.

I want first to consider and compare the alleged connections between the story and the Alice Mitchell and Lizzie Borden murder cases, exploring how and to what ends these links have been constructed. I will show, firstly, that while there may be some basis for the proposed connection between “The Long Arm” and the Alice Mitchell murders, the link is more the result of previous scholars bringing a limiting, decided-in-advance political agenda to their readings of the story than a reflection of actual resonances between the two stories. The concept of symptomatic reading, on which many such readings are more or less directly based, allows for the proposition that the apparent weaknesses of those text/context resonances might be merely a result of the “depth” at which the allusion is hidden. Shifting away from such a symptomatic reading of the story, I will show that the link to the Borden murders, though not exclusively relevant, is more textually and contextually

demonstrable, as well as more politically enabling.⁴⁰ Far from a straightforward debunking, my reading seeks to push—as my methodology has promised—the tensions between possible meanings, exploring some compelling textual manifestations of the contextual liminality I have illustrated in this chapter thus far.

On Monday, 25 January 1892, 19-year-old Alice Mitchell slit the throat of her friend Freda Ward, age 17, with a razor. Both well-known society figures, the young women had been extremely close. When it came to the attention of their families that Alice and “Fred” were going to elope, with Alice posing as a man, “Alvin,” the families intervened to block the elopement and imposed a complete cessation of contact between the pair. Shortly thereafter, stopping on a buggy-ride with her friend Lillie Johnson and Lillie’s “little nephew,” who waited in the carriage, Alice murdered Freda, “so no one else could get her” (Faderman *Surpassing* 291). In court, Alice pled “not guilty” on the basis of “present insanity,” and she was sent to a County Asylum, where she eventually died (“Insanity the Defence”). The newspapers dramatically sensationalized the murder, describing it as a “Most Shocking Crime,” portraying it as “very unnatural” and “unique on

⁴⁰ Rohy acknowledges that by pursuing “narrative mastery,” the “feminist critic” runs the risk of enacting the very policing of female and lesbian sexuality she observes of “The Long Arm,” as her “act of reading, however elliptical, must constitute a new attempt to narrate ‘what really happened’” (115). She hopes, however, “that the feminist critic can be more successful than Freeman’s female detective. Exposing the bad logic of a phallic regime of knowledge, ‘The Long Arm’ helps a different sort of feminist detective work to discover what the detective plot cannot know about itself: a disciplinary system in which lesbian sexuality is never more real than when it is most impossible” (115). While Rohy’s reluctance to produce “narrative mastery” reflects the openness to textual and contextual contradictions I am pursuing here, her alignment of the feminist critic with the female detective and her quest for “what the detective plot cannot know about itself” presents her interpretation as a symptomatic reading founded ultimately upon a psychoanalytic framework entailing a reliance on the concept of a textual “unconscious.” Tellingly, it is this her adherence to this framework that results in her conclusion that “Because lesbian desire is phobically represented as unthinkable, constructed as impossible, the fantasy of the phallic woman and of resistant lesbian desire cannot escape the logic of dominant discourse. The castrating potential of the phallic woman in ‘The Long arm’ functions, like castration itself, as an enabling threat, whose anxiogenic potential does not negate its structuring role in systems of sexual and gender propriety” (115). Her understanding of the text as repressing its deeper meaning thus explicitly forecloses the possibility for resistance.

American soil” (Duggan “Trials” 794). It was cited thereafter in news reports of “similar” incidents, in legal discourse, and perhaps most significantly, in Havelock Ellis’s *Sexual Inversion*. It is this latter, sexological context, of course, that informs the proposed connection between the story and Freeman’s “The Long Arm.”

The connection of the Mitchell-Ward murder story to “The Long Arm” was first proposed by Lillian Faderman in the aforementioned *Surpassing The Love of Men*. “There are so many similarities between Freeman’s story and the Alice Mitchell case,” Faderman remarks, “that one wonders if Freeman hadn’t seen newspaper accounts of the actual murder in the two or three years before she wrote ‘The Long Arm’ (293). Among the “similarities” Faderman observes are that Phœbe:

is, like Alice Mitchell, the masculine one in the relationship between two women; like Mitchell, her motive for murder is fear that her beloved will be separated from her; like Mitchell, she is apparently insane and shows no remorse over the murder (Sarah says, “I cannot describe the dreadful calmness with which that woman told this to me....I believe in demoniacal possession after this”); and like Mitchell, she dies a short time after being institutionalized. Finally, just as it was believed that Mitchell’s relationship with Freda Ward was not genital, we learn that Phœbe has a downstairs bedroom and Maria has the one upstairs. (293)

These connections are variably persuasive. Most questionable among them is the observation that both Phœbe and Alice died a short time after being institutionalized. Faderman’s choice of the word “institutionalized” conceals the different kinds of institution to which the women were remanded: prison for Phœbe, asylum for Alice.⁴¹ More troublingly, though, Faderman’s suggestion that Freeman may have intended to evoke similarity through the fact that both women “die[d] a short time

⁴¹ See “Alice Mitchell Insane.”

after being institutionalized” entails an anachronism: Alice Mitchell did not die until 1898, three years after the publication of Freeman’s story.⁴²

Faderman’s attribution of insanity to Phœbe is also somewhat dubious.⁴³ As Faderman points out, “Sarah says, ‘I cannot describe the dreadful calmness with which that woman told this to me....I believe in demoniacal possession after this’” (quoted in *Surpassing* 293). However, the “dreadful calmness” Sarah reports is complicated in relation to any allegations of insanity given its connection to Lizzie Borden, whose widely-noted lack of emotional expression during the trial was the subject of much public attention.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the observation is offered through the perspective of Sarah, who might very well be accused of the very “dreadful calmness” in the face of violence that she observes in her counterpart. As for demoniacal possession, it seems to me an accusation quite distinct from insanity, especially as contrasted with Phœbe’s overt religiosity. (Without the ellipsis, the lines read, “I cannot describe the dreadful calmness with which that woman told this — that woman with the good face, whom I had last heard praying like a saint in meeting. I believe in demoniacal possession after this” [75]). Furthermore, although “demoniacal possession” suggests a lack of accountability, it is the only point in the story in which any such non-responsibility is suggested, and it is in fact rendered ridiculous in the context of its position in the story. At the moment in which these lines are delivered, Sarah has been faced not only with an abundance of very clear evidence and an absurdly, explicitly delineated explanation of the motive by

⁴² Mitchell attempted suicide while in the asylum at Bolivar in 1895, an event that made national papers, but not until after Freeman had already written “The Long Arm.” (The story was completed before 1 May; the suicide attempt was reported on 8 June [“Alice Mitchell Tries”]). In *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, Faderman excludes the misleading connection, but in describing “The Long Arm,” she erroneously refers to Maria as “Mary” (56).

⁴³ One might argue that Mitchell’s insanity is also highly dubious, but she was sent to an asylum, for better or for worse, which certainly creates a strong *association* with insanity, one not at all present in Freeman’s tale.

⁴⁴ For more on Lizzie’s emotional restraint, see Appendix.

detective Dix, she has also just witnessed a detailed confession from Phœbe herself, outlining at length the very earthly (as opposed to demoniacal) basis for the murder she clearly planned and methodically enacted. Sarah's analysis is completely inappropriate to the occasion, continuing the narrative's characterization of Sarah as wilfully ignorant and incapable of inference.⁴⁵ Phœbe may certainly be taken as duplicitous, but she is never presented as insane.

The other similarities Faderman identifies, the masculine/feminine gendering of the couple and the non-genital nature of the relationship require deeper examination. Lisa Duggan identifies in the Alice Mitchell story "three essential structural elements" that together "constitute[d] one version of a new narrative-information," which "appeared in various permutations in newspapers throughout the period 1880-1920" ("Trials" 799-800). Those three elements are (1) the masculine/feminine gendering of the couple, as noted by Faderman (2) conflict between the two women over the nature of the relationship and (3) "conflict between the 'engaged' couple and their female relatives" (798-799). With these broad structural components, which as Duggan identifies are taken up in discourse beyond that specific to the Mitchell-Ward case, it is possible to more readily identify textual resonances with "The Long Arm." Ultimately, however, and as Duggan's analysis itself reveals, these elements resonate with broader social contexts than the Alice Mitchell story alone; the interpretation of "The Long Arm" in relation to Alice Mitchell, specifically, forecloses the story's potential, shedding little light on themes taken up in a context of an anything-but-clear comment. Although Duggan regards "The Long Arm" as responding to broad cultural trends of which, for her, Mitchell is

⁴⁵ For a reading of Sarah's refusal of knowledge in relation to the detective genre and cultural representations of lesbianism, see Rohy, "'The Long Arm' and the Law."

just an example, other critics tend—like Faderman—to treat the allusion as more direct.

Duggan's third structural element, the conflict between the couple and their female relatives, is the basis for perhaps the most compelling and complex connection between the Mitchell story and "The Long Arm" story, for a number of reasons. Conflict between women, especially in the context of regulating sexual practice, is a major theme of both stories. Rohy interprets "The Long Arm" in relation to the female policing (and self-policing) of female sexuality and lesbianism, noting that the story "[t]urn[s] women against each other, pitting the female detective against the lesbian murderess and against herself" (105). Echoing the real-life policing of Freda's sexuality by her sister, who was involved in both the prohibition of contact between Freda and Alice and the actual attack (attempting to fight Alice off), Sarah is placed in a position of policing to which (in her alignment with Phoebe) she also subjects herself. Sarah is also the victim of others' policing, though, by Phoebe and Maria.

The theme of female policing, while clearly operational in the reporting of the Alice Mitchell story, also appears in another Lizzie version of this period, as well as in the Lizzie Borden archive more broadly. One of the first known pieces of fiction that has been identified as alluding to the Lizzie Borden murders is "Dash Dare on his Mettle," a dime novel by E. Strayer (of the Stratemeyer Syndicate) that Kathleen Chamberlain has interpreted through a Marxist lens sensitive to its themes of "capitalism and counterfeiting" (175). Chamberlain notes the way in which Strayer's version alters elements of the Lizzie Borden story as reported in the news to neutralize the threat posed by female violence, demonstrating that the narrative self-"deconstruct[s]" in its attempt to contain that threat (189). One aspect of

Strayer's story Chamberlain does not address is the role of two female detectives appointed to "guard" Ella Canby, the protagonist and Lizzie figure of "Dash Dare." Ella is stereotypically feminine and also—the story takes pains to emphasize—"innocent as a new-born babe" (28); she is in no way responsible for the murders, which were actually committed by a male outsider with a financial motive. Ella's fiancé Harry Budd pays a visit to "Dash Dare," eponymous detective hero, in the hopes that he will "prove her innocence to the world!" (5). When Dash asks, "Is she in prison?" Harry replies, "Not yet. But she is watched day and night by two female detectives sworn in by the authorities" (5). The domestic environment of Ella's home is rendered prison-like by the presence of the guards, who are ironically there to both protect and detain her. "Elderly," "stern of aspect" and un-talkative, one of the guards, Mrs. Ellery, watches Ella "very much as a cat watches a mouse. Such was her duty." She speaks to Ella "not unkindly," though "fully convinced in her own mind that Ella Canby was guilty" (6). The guards are both well intentioned and easily misled. In one scene, Mrs. Ellery easily falls for Dash Dare's disguise as an old man, and when he "whispers in her ear," she is convinced instantly of his right to speak to Ella, contrary to her orders that no one be admitted to the house (6). On another occasion a guard described as "quite grasping in nature" explicitly accepts a bribe from Dash whom she believes to be a newsreporter (8). The theme of female policing, generally, and of betrayal (especially for money), more specifically, is a prominent one in the Lizzie Borden archive, and one that has a basis in the Lizzie Borden story as reported in its time (as I will explore below). The presence of female policing in "The Long Arm," given its mutual appearance in other versions of the Lizzie Borden story, thus in part affirms the story's allusion to the Borden murders (and/or to broader contextual factors). In tracing female policing, like the other

connections that have been proposed between “The Long Arm” and the Mitchell-Ward murders, to broader cultural contexts (as Duggan does), the determined-in-advance agendas of critics seeking to find a comment on lesbian sexuality, specifically, in Freeman’s story are revealed as inhibiting the broader significances of the text.

Although the connection between “The Long Arm” and the Borden story is almost universally acknowledged and is explored in some depth in relation to gothic themes by S. Bradley Shaw, neither the specific points of resonance nor the implications of the allusion for the story’s prospective feminist import have been explored in full detail.⁴⁶ In the following section, I will explore ways in which “The Long Arm” resonates with the story of the Borden murders as understood in their time, particularly emphasizing those resonances that strongly outweigh, undermine, or complicate its problematic connection to the Mitchell trial (which, as I have shown, is the strongest basis for a critique of Freeman’s story). Within the context of its allusion to the Borden murders, however, many of the details of the Lizzie Borden story are invoked in such a way as to serve an approximate rather than an exact

⁴⁶ Even readers of the text in its own time who identified the story’s allusion to the Borden murders tended to strongly downplay its significance. One critic reports:

I am told that the dramatic title which it bears, “The Long Arm,” was the selection of Miss Wilkins’s collaborator, MR. J.E. Chamberlin of *The Youth’s Companion*, she having originally called it “The Story of Sarah Tompkins.” Had that original title stood, probably more people would have surmised from what source the tale had its origin, since the country has not yet forgotten the extraordinary strain felt over the trial of a Fall River woman accused of the murder of her parents. The story, however, is not built upon that murder or the trial; it was simply suggested by the sad event. The author saw in the tragedy the number of solutions that might be imagined, and, taking advantage of that fact, created the murder of an elderly man, upon whose unmarried daughter suspicion could fall. The dress, with its blood-stains, also carries a recollection of the real tragedy, but beyond that there is no actual resemblance in the course of the events and of the narrative. (Wingate 123)

As my reading in this chapter reveals, the resonances go much further than the basic premise and the blood-stained dress. This critic was not alone, though, in his dismissal of the connection: even influential Borden scholar Edmund Pearson finds the connection unimpressive, remarking, “Readers who are inclined to search for these forgotten tales, because of any reputed resemblance to the Borden case, are advised not to waste their time” (*Trial* 82).

allusion, which supports the story's broader liminality. In particular, the ways in which the Borden murders are evoked serves to blur the differences between Phoebe and Sarah, thus supporting the linked or doubled relationship critics have identified between the two characters.⁴⁷ By emphasising the liminal quality of their relationship, the story rejects the dichotomy Sarah embraces over-emphatically between female violence and the lived constraints shared by women. Phoebe's "almost abnormal[ity]" takes on a new significance in this context.

The problematic sexual "hybridity" suggested by the long arm has been noted, but Sarah, in her liminal positioning, is also a "hybrid" character.⁴⁸ She is between a conformist and a rebel, between a detective and a doll, between a Maria and a Phoebe, between ignorance and epiphany, religion and reason, science and superstition—between devoted daughter and parent-killer Lizzie Borden. The reading critics have offered of Phoebe as deviant man/woman hybrid (which would in a sense be a liminal reading of her character) neglects the textual context in which that liminality is represented, a context in which, as this chapter has already begun to show, liminality is not the exception—it is the rule. In Sarah, Freeman presents a pitifully ignorant/unknowing, stereotypically feminine figure, whose conventional motive (marriage) is achieved through a gender-confused, lesbian monster stand-in Phoebe, as the popular imagination would have it. However, Sarah's perspective is surrounded by dramatic irony, through which her stereotypical femininity is parodied. Simultaneously, irony undercuts the straightforward symbolism of Phoebe's arm as the stigmatisation of lesbian sexuality. Ultimately, Freeman presents a critique of the increasing conflation of sexual "deviance" and criminality in

⁴⁷ See Rohy, for example.

⁴⁸ See Diggs.

contemporaneous media sources like those in which the Mitchell-Ward murder was reported. “The Long Arm” renders absurd by depicting ironically the unjustifiable linking of lesbian sexuality (as embodied by Phœbe, with her hyper-symbolic long arm) and criminality (the Lizzie Borden story)—social and sexual “deviance,” in other words—through its mutual evocation of the two discourses in far-fetched conjunction.

The basic premise of “The Long Arm” and its positioning as a murder mystery provide the strongest connection to the Borden murders. The locked-room scenario and limited number of suspects suggested in “The Long Arm” parallel the comparably limited parameters of the Borden case as publicized in its time. A woman accused of murdering a family member in broad daylight, acquitted of the crime for lack of evidence, but remaining under the suspicion of the public, exactly describes the situation of both Sarah and Lizzie. Shaw notes that Freeman’s story filled a gap created by Lizzie’s post-trial silence (217-218), fulfilling the desire for a public confession. Unlike the Mitchell-Ward murder, of which the “solution” was known, the Borden murders were unsolved—thence the opportunity identified by Chamberlin to “invent a solution” to them for the public (Chamberlin).

Various details from “The Long Arm” resonate directly with the Lizzie Borden story. The establishment of the exact hour of death, for instance, is an important aspect of both the Borden and the Fairbanks cases. (This was a non-issue for the Mitchell-Ward case, in which the murder occurred in public; the time was thus established as fact.)⁴⁹ Both Sarah and the Borden sisters hire a detective, a

⁴⁹ For Sarah, the post-mortem revelation of the exact time of death as calculated by the coroner is the detail that frees Henry from suspicion, validating his alibi. The timing of the murders was of vital importance to the Borden murders, too, which were calculated to have occurred approximately an hour and a half apart, complicating any arguments as to the possibility of murder committed in a mad rage (an hour and a half is a long time to sustain a mad rage!) and also rendering rather unlikely the

connection no previous critic has observed.⁵⁰ The presence in the house in the days following the murders of two neighbours is another shared detail of the Fairbanks and Borden stories: Mrs. Holmes and Mrs. Adams in “The Long Arm” echo Alice Russell and Mrs. Churchill, who testified at the trial.⁵¹ Phoebe and Sarah, also two women neighbours, may also evoke Russell and Churchill, especially in the aforementioned context of female policing.

In contrast to these direct similarities, as I have suggested previously, many of the resonances between “The Long Arm” and the Lizzie Borden story are approximate, not exact. The setting of “The Long Arm,” for example, resonates and plays with (“liminalizes,” one might say) the geographic location of the Borden murders. Indeed, the New England setting of “The Long Arm” (versus the starkly contrasting urban Tennessee situation of the Mitchell-Ward murder story) is one of the most basic connections between “The Long Arm” and Lizzie Borden.⁵² The story’s events are firmly ensconced in New England geography. The exact town in which Sarah and her father live is not revealed, but Rufus Bennett has a farm in Vermont, and the detective comes from Boston. Tellingly, the town of Digby, which provided Sarah with a refuge from her father and correspondingly unhappy home life, a paid occupation, and her love interest, Harry, does not appear to exist in real life.⁵³ (For the real women of nineteenth-century New England, like Lizzie Borden,

possibility of an outside intruder having committed the murders. (He/she would have had to either leave and re-enter the house unseen or hide him/herself in the house during the intervening hour and a half without being detected.) The establishment of the exact times of death was a significant and well-publicized aspect of the Borden trial. For more on the timing of the murders, see Sullivan 125.

⁵⁰ See “Hanscom: The Pinkerton Detective” (Appendix).

⁵¹ For more on their role, see Appendix.

⁵² For more information about the role of its New England setting upon the Lizzie Borden story, see “The Setting: Fall River and New England” (Appendix).

⁵³ That is, it does not appear to correspond to any real New England city. There is a Digby in Nova Scotia, but assuming Dedham (where Sarah is tried) and Boston (whence the detective) are both within a reasonable distance of Sarah’s home, it is not likely Harry would have driven casually from

the respite Digby represents to Sarah was often unavailable.) The mortal-sounding Dedham, though, to which Sarah is dispatched for imprisonment prior to her trial, is, tellingly, less than 15 miles from Freeman's native Randolph, Massachusetts.

The more immediate setting of the story also resonates strongly with the Borden murders and similarly feeds into the theme of liminality. Unlike the very public, outdoor scene of the Mitchell/Ward murder, the Borden murders (and the motivations usually attributed to its most frequently alleged perpetrator) took place behind closed doors, in the private surrounds of the domestic realm. Like "The Long Arm," in which the features of Sarah's house (the locked doors, the layout, the clues therein) are explored at length and figure significantly in the story's plot, Lizzie Borden versions often emphasize the architectural and environmental attributes of the Borden house itself, especially in terms of constraint.⁵⁴ Once again, though, the resonance with the Borden murders is not straightforward; it is the negotiation of interior and exterior settings that Freeman's story emphasizes. The cat flap, the inside-outside portal through which the murderer gains access to the house, is the crucial key to the mystery.

The ages of the alleged murderesses are another way in which "The Long Arm" plays with a near-commonality between the Borden and Fairbanks murders. Unlike Alice Ward, who was just 19 at the time of the murder, Sarah is 29. Whereas Alice might be seen as on the cusp of adulthood, Sarah is on the cusp of spinsterhood. Lizzie Borden likewise confronted the increasing prospect (the growing reality, even) of spinsterhood, 32 at the time of the murders. (She was certainly no teenager.) The ages, then, 29 and 32, are close, but not identical. Indeed,

Digby to Sarah's house of an evening, a journey of around 500 miles by today's roads, and partly over water.

⁵⁴ For more information on the depictions of domestic architecture in Lizzie Borden fiction, See "The House" (Appendix).

the proximal-but-disparate relationship between the ages of the real-life and literary Lizzie characters resonates with the broader liminality I have identified as a major motif and structuring concept of “The Long Arm.” Twenty-nine to Lizzie’s 32, Sarah is almost married, almost murderess. By revealing Sarah’s age as 29, the story might be taken to suggest that had Sarah faced a few years of maltreatment and deprivation at her father’s hands, she too might have turned to violence (even though in this particular version, as fate would have it, Phœbe steps in to spare her the dirty work).⁵⁵

The positioning of Sarah on the brink of Lizzie-Bordendom parallels the sense in which she is placed on the brink of becoming a typical Freeman character (spared this ambivalent fate, too, by Phœbe’s dramatic intervention). Reichardt, among others, has noted a pattern in the lives of Freeman’s Sarah-like characters:

In her stories, Freeman often initiates a seemingly traditional love plot only to interrupt that plot and subordinate the romantic concern, focusing attention instead on the internal struggles of the main female character [...] The broad outline of the situation is usually as follows: the love-crazed, romantic woman succeeds in coming between a pair of lovers [...] and] the stronger [“practical” and “self-determining”] woman, who can probably retain the man if she so chooses, eventually and often after much agonizing “gives” him to the helpless female [...] Once she relinquishes him, the practical and self-possessed woman does not, in Freeman’s world, find a counterpart to marry.

⁵⁵ Sarah and Lizzie also have related (but not exactly the same) occupations. Sarah describes herself as a “country school-teacher” (2), and Lizzie taught Sunday School at the local church (Sullivan 21). As with the close-but-not-identical ages of the two characters, the near match resonates with the story’s broader liminality. Also shared by the two figures is the suggested financial motive for the murders. It emerged at the Borden trial that there had been financial disputes in the family, one of which was based upon Andrew’s gift of a property to his wife, Abbey. The girls demanded comparable generosity, and Andrew obliged. Upon Andrew’s death, Lizzie inherited a large fortune. The threat of disinheritance is often suggested as a motive for the Borden murders, with all sorts of speculation about a secret will, its alleged destruction by Lizzie in the furnace, and variations on this theme (see Rehak 30). Sarah, too, faces the threat of disinheritance, in her case as an obstacle to her marriage to Henry. In the opening pages of “The Long Arm,” Sarah explains, “My father was very much opposed to the match, and has told me repeatedly that if I insisted upon marrying him in his lifetime he would disinherit me” (3). The possibility for financial gain through the murder, however, is downplayed in Freeman’s text, the romantic plot foregrounded instead. The story’s unreliable narration, though, suggests Sarah may not be entirely forthcoming about her suspected motivations, as she takes pains on more than one occasion to protest her ignorance of her father’s finances. Like other instances of Sarah’s persistent ignorance, this extends the gap between Sarah and her readers

There are no more suitors on the horizon. Relegating the conventional pair of lovers to the subplot, Freeman now concentrates on the mental trauma of the woman who is left alone. (*Web* 30-31)

Based on the opening pages of “The Long Arm,” readers might with good reason identify Sarah as a typical Freeman protagonist embroiled in a plot following more or less this very formula. Sarah describes with the level-headed stoicism the unlikelihood of her marriage to Henry given her father’s objection and notes furthermore that “in nine-tenths of the cases wherein children marry against their parents’ wishes, even when the parents have no just grounds for opposition, the marriages are unhappy” (3). Not wishing to hold Harry to an unreasonably lengthy (five-year) engagement, Sarah “resolved that, ever I suspected that his fancy turned toward any other girl, I would not hinder it, especially as I was getting older and, I thought, losing my good looks” (4). Sure enough, this very possibility arises. “A little while ago,” Sarah relays,

a young and pretty girl came to Digby to teach the school in the south district. She boarded in the same house with Henry. I heard that he was somewhat attentive to her, and I made up my mind I would not interfere. At the same time it seemed to me that my heart was breaking. I heard her people had money, too, and she was an only child. I had always felt that Henry ought to marry a wife with money, because he had nothing himself, and was not very strong. (4)

Henry, in his weakness and dependence, is characteristic of the “weak-willed” (Reichardt *Uncollected* xvii) men Freeman’s strong-minded protagonists often forego, and the “young and pretty girl” (Freeman 4) in Digby is just the sort of character to whom he might be typically be “relinquished” (Reichardt *Web* 31). That Sarah “made up her mind” not to “interfere” suggests she felt it was in her power to sabotage the love plot, but—like the Freeman protagonists Reichardt describes—chooses not to. Despite the pragmatism of her self-denial, Sarah nonetheless exhibits the “agonizing” Reichardt identifies as a common side effect of the romantic forfeit.

“I thought of that other girl,” she explains; “I could see her pretty face wherever I looked. But at last I cried myself to sleep” (10).

Although Sarah undergoes the typical pain of a Freeman protagonist about to yield her passive male suitor, the story’s evocations of the Borden murders begin early in the tale to undermine the conventional formula, positioning Sarah in a liminal position in relation to the typical Freeman formula. In a scene from Chapter 1, Sarah’s father Martin is attacked by Rufus Bennett, who is driven to rage over a business disagreement and attempts to strangle him. (This is one of the first and in some ways most significant details of the story that might have called to readers’ minds the Borden trial. Like Martin Fairbanks, Andrew Borden was reported to have had a dispute with an out-of-town character with whom he had had business dealings some time before the murders.)⁵⁶ Shaw has noted that Rufus Bennett serves as “the gothic tradition’s obligatory ‘red herring’ suspect” (220). The “red herring” of the Borden murders, a character with whom Bennett is also thus aligned, is John Morse, Lizzie’s visiting uncle on whom suspicion first fell.⁵⁷ In “The Long Arm,” Rufus grabs hold of Martin’s neck, strangling him. Sarah jumps in to protect her father:

I went to the desk-drawer where father had kept a pistol since some houses in the village were broken into; I got out the pistol, laid hold of Rufus again, and held the muzzle against his forehead.
 “You let go of my father,” said I, “or I’ll fire!”
 Then Rufus let go, and father dropped like a log. (6)

The lines offer no narrative commentary, despite their drama and their suggestion as to Sarah’s capacity for violence. She makes no explanation, a fact that draws

⁵⁶ For more information on the dispute, Sullivan 89-90 and 98-99. In response to Rufus’ attack on Martin, Sarah goes to “the desk-drawer where father kept a pistol since some houses had been broken into” (6), a possible reference to the so-called “daylight robbery” of the Borden home, of which Lizzie was suspected and after which reportedly more attention was paid to the locking of doors. (For more information on the daylight robbery, see “Robberies” [Appendix].) The allusion might suggest that, as in the Borden household, the increase in domestic security might have more to do with the threat posed by a rightfully disgruntled daughter than any prospective intruder.

⁵⁷ For more information on John Morse, see Appendix.

attention to the complexities of her role as narrator. The day after this dramatic display of her capacity for violence, Sarah's father reiterates his ban on her contact with Henry.

I did not say a word; I just looked up at him as I sat there. Father turned pale and shrank back, and put his hand to his throat, where Rufus had clutched him. There were some purple finger-marks there. "I suppose you would have been glad if he had killed me," father cried out.

"I saved your life," said I.

"What did you do with that pistol?" he asked. (9)

Once again, Sarah offers no narrative comment on the surprising reaction she evokes from her father. That Sarah shrinks her father with but a look, causing him to wonder about the whereabouts of the pistol, suggests that although she may be wilfully ignorant of female capacity for violence (as other scholars have noted), those around her are not. Of equal significance, these lines suggest a break from the typical Freeman formula, implying Sarah might not be as quick to relinquish her suitor as Freeman's other protagonists, might not be the willing boyfriend-conceding type after all. Here, as in the examples above, the allusion to the Borden story (the reference to Andrew's dispute with a disgruntled employee) is advanced in such a way as to serve the story's liminality (and dramatic irony). "The Long Arm" presents a scene that resonates with the Borden murders (with Andrew's business quarrel), but it uses it not to divest suspicion from its Lizzie figure, as newspapers did, by providing an alternate suspect; rather, "The Long Arm" uses the scene precisely to demonstrate Sarah's capacity for violence (and, in particular, for the wielding of a conventionally masculine weapon), a "twist" on the allusion rather than a direct evocation. By using a twist on the Borden story to reveal Sarah's violent side, the story contributes to the similarities between Sarah and Phoebe, undermining in the process the convincingness of her physically symbolized difference.

In one instance, a Lizzie-allusive detail is dispersed between Phœbe and Sarah, once again blurring their difference. Both the Lizzie legend and the Freeman tale place major significance on a calico dress and the burning of evidence. In “The Long Arm,” Sarah’s discovery of her dress covered with blood in the closet is a key moment in that it places suspicion firmly upon Sarah and, in the bizarre reaction it evokes, it objectifies Sarah’s perspective as distinct from the reality of the story (more below). Lizzie’s destruction of a dress in the kitchen fire in the days following the murders was reported in testimony by Alice Russell and became the centre of a huge controversy as to what Lizzie was wearing at the time of the murders, whether she would have had time to change before being seen by neighbours, and so on; much was made of the controversy in the media.⁵⁸ Although Sarah does not burn the dress, she does take steps to eliminate its use as evidence, using a paste to eliminate the stains, and Phœbe burns the garb she wears during the murders. The Borden connection is thus dispersed between the two suspected Lizzies of “The Long Arm,” enhancing the mystery and the strengthening the association between Phœbe and Sarah.⁵⁹

The blurring of boundaries between Phœbe and Sarah combines with the story’s use of irony to complicate a straightforward symbolic reading of the phallic long arm. The liminality suggested by the relationship between “The Long Arm” and its contexts also manifests on a narrative and on a thematic level in the form of phrases that exist at the intersection of two possible but disparate interpretations, one

⁵⁸ For more on this, see “The Burning of a Dress” (Appendix).

⁵⁹ Phœbe’s coolness in the face of violence alludes quite directly to Lizzie’s reported public demeanour. (For more on Lizzie’s lack of emotional expression, see Appendix.) In this, too, Phœbe and Sarah are connected through their mutual link to Lizzie Borden: although Sarah is disturbed by Phœbe’s lack of emotion, she, too, remains astonishingly cool in the face of violence in the scene in which she rescues her father from Rufus Bennett’s potentially fatal clutches. In this sense, again, the resonance with the Borden murders is used to develop the link between Phœbe and Sarah.

literal and one ironic. A “tongue in cheek” reading has been suggested by Diggs, who notes that “Phœbe’s defence of the validity of her ‘home’ suggests that Freeman’s sympathies may have been with Phœbe and Maria,” but Diggs ultimately concludes that “the pathological implications of Phœbe’s arm, and her status as criminal, undercut the subversive elements of the story” (225). And yet many aspects of the story seem deeply ironic. Consider, for instance, the line to which Diggs refers, when Phœbe exclaims, in explanation of her offense,

“I did it!” Phœbe cried out to me [Sarah]. “I am found out, and I have made up my mind to confess. She was going to marry your father — I found it out. I stopped it once before. This time I knew I couldn't unless I killed him. She's lived with me in that house for over forty years. There are other ties as strong as the marriage one, that are just as sacred. What right had he to take her away from me and break up my home?” (70)

On the one hand these lines may be interpreted as an earnest claim on Phœbe’s part that female partnership be respected as a legitimate alternative to marriage, a demand for the same rights as those afforded a heterosexual marital relationship. At worst, the positioning of these lines within the perspective of a soon-to-be-killed-off murderer renders them a reflection of the misguided worldview that drove Phœbe to kill, a misinterpretation of the social validity of female partnership symptomatic of her defective character. Even within the most sympathetic interpretation, at best, they render Phœbe a martyr for a lost cause. On the other hand, though, the lines might be interpreted ironically. Phœbe’s cry that “There are other ties as strong as the marriage one, and just as sacred,” might be taken to suggest that intimate female friendship inflected with patriarchal undertones can be just as (*un*)sacred as its heterosexual counterparts, just as oppressive, controlling, possessive, and prone to violence.

That Freeman's tale is not to be taken too literally is also suggested in the parodic characterisation of Sarah. Sarah undertakes a highly methodical, almost scientific effort to uncover the mystery of her father's death, and in her diligence she uncovers many clues. However, she demonstrates a preposterous inability to draw conclusions from her observations or to make even the most basic inferences.⁶⁰ This renders her an almost comedic figure, distanced from the reader through her narrative objectification. This distancing produces several moments of dramatic irony. The first arises when Sarah describes waking up on the morning of the murders to find one of her dresses covered in blood:

It was covered with spots — horrible great splashes and streaks down the front. The right sleeve, too, was stained, and all the stains were wet.

“What have I got on my dress?” said I.

It looked like blood. Then I smelled of it, and it was sickening in my nostrils, but I was not sure what the smell of blood was like. I thought I must have got the stains by some accident the night before.

“If that is blood on my dress,” I said, “I must do something to get it off at once, or the dress will be ruined.”

It came to my mind that I had been told that blood-stains had been removed from cloth by an application of flour paste on the wrong side. I took my green silk, and ran down the back stairs, which lead—having a door at the foot—directly into the kitchen. (11-12)

Sarah's strange response draws attention to her role as narrator by not following logically on from the events that have occurred, and her hyperbolic concern for feminine duty is absurd. If you woke up one morning and found one of your dresses covered in blood, would your first concern be for the dress? As S. Bradley Shaw puts it, this “housewifey [...] act [...] is entirely practical yet makes no sense at all” (222-223). This is the first instance of many in which Sarah demonstrates the incapacity to make any kind of creative inference on the basis of her own observation, a persistent

⁶⁰ For an interpretation of this persistent resistance of knowledge in relation to lesbian sexuality, see Rohy.

ignorance ultimately culminating in her misguided refusal of the possibility of Phoebe having killed her father. This scene is also interesting because in this moment Sarah is both traditionally feminine, in her “housewifey” behaviour, and traditionally un-“feminine,” in her lack of perturbation and her practical response to the blood. In one moment, Freeman thus parodies stereotypes of femininity and of masculinity, by deploying and exaggerating them both in a single act.

Sarah’s wilful ignorance is again parodied in her dismissal of Phoebe Dole not only as a suspect but as an agent, generally. In fleeing the scene of the murders, Sarah walks past Phoebe and Maria’s house, and does not intend to stop there for help, noting, quote “they were only women, and could do nothing” (16). This line is rendered ironic by the eventual revelation that in fact, Phoebe is highly capable—capable, even, of enacting a very calculated and strategically executed murder. Sarah’s naïveté as to female capacity for violence becomes the subject of narrative irony, once again calling into question the reliability of her narration.

“The Long Arm” problematizes Phoebe’s fiendishness as well as Sarah’s stereotypical femininity. Until she realises Phoebe’s role in the murders, which—given how incredibly slow she is to put two and two together—is very late in the story, Sarah likes and trusts Phoebe and seems untroubled by Phoebe’s relationship with Maria. At one point, Phoebe snaps at Maria, who is overcome with emotion in the wake of Sarah’s father’s death. “Sometimes I have to be real sharp with her,” Phoebe tells Sarah, “for her own good” (26). Sarah doesn’t object. In fact, she nods in approval, informing readers that “Maria Woods has always been considered a sweet, weakly, dependent woman, and Phoebe Dole is undoubtedly very fond of her. She has seemed to shield her, and take care of her nearly all her life” (26). That the women live together in exclusive companionship also seems not to bother Sarah.

“The two have lived together since they were young girls. Phœbe is tall, and very pale and thin; but she never had a day's illness. She is plain, yet there is a kind of severe goodness and faithfulness about her colourless face” (26-27).

So when and why does the story turn on Phœbe, and what can one make of her arguably phallic, “almost abnormally” long arm? Vitaly, the introduction of the long arm is not linked to the revelation of any new information about the nature of Phœbe and Maria’s relationship as intimate, exclusive, female, or “lesbian” in modern terms. Rather, it is the revelation of the relationship as oppressive, non-consensual, and imprisoning to which the long arm is linked.⁶¹ Sarah knows from the start of the story that Phœbe and Maria have lived together, quote, “since they were young girls,” that they care deeply for one another, etc., but she nonetheless characterises Phœbe positively and even approves of what she observes to be Phœbe’s controlling attitude toward Maria because she assumes that Phœbe has her partner’s best interests in mind. In other words, Sarah is aware and even supportive of Phœbe’s “lesbian” sexuality from the beginning of the story; it is her violence and oppression of Maria that comes as a shock. But the story has shown Sarah to be somewhat delayed in her epiphanies—is Freeman suggesting to her readers that they should have known from the start to suspect female friendship, that lesbianism is inevitably linked to deviance and criminality? I do not think so.

First of all, Phœbe’s deviance as symbolised in the long arm comes out of nowhere, contrived simply for the consequently and perhaps deliberately

⁶¹ Duggan is practically a lone voice in challenging the relevance of the Mitchell-Ward murder to the story, and she does so on the basis of a non-sexual view of the relationship, which is not a perquisite of my reading: “There is no elaboration of romantic intensity between the women housemates [...] Phœbe Dole is presented as a ‘proper’ lady; she and Maria have separate bedrooms, and their relationship bears no trace of sensuality. Dole’s evil, and her violence, is linked to her determination to dominate Maria—a determination shown as being parallel to the determination of Sarah’s father to dominate *her* and prevent a marriage she greatly desired” (*Sapphic* 186).

unsatisfying resolution of the mystery, and Phœbe is disposed of with equal abruptness. “A month later. I have just heard that Phœbe Dole has died in prison. This is my last entry. May God help all other innocent women in hard straights as He has helped me!” (76). These terse final lines cut Sarah’s narrative to a jarringly sudden end, and hint at the positive outcome Phœbe’s crime has had for Sarah; in a very real sense, the greatest “help” Sarah has received at the end of the story is the handy (pun-intended) elimination of her father by Phœbe. The marriage plot resolves with what one might describe as mock-Dickensian haste, leaving Sarah to marry her intended. Given this tone, the late and rather abrupt introduction of the long arm into the story should not be interpreted as a weakness of the narrative as a detective story, but as a revealing parallel to the abrupt, unjustifiable appeal to new material (stigmatised types, characterisations of monstrosity, fiendishness, etc.) in seeking to explain away female violence.

What Sarah observes but fails to understand is not the evidence of Phœbe’s lesbian sexuality, but of the structures of patriarchal oppression that have come to dictate her treatment of Maria. Their relationship symbolises stereotypical Victorian notions of gender roles, and thus invites a critique thereof. Phœbe is in charge, does all the planning, provides for the household economically, and is responsible for protecting the contrastingly vulnerable, emotional, weak and weak-minded feminine Maria. Sarah trusts in this patriarchal system: just as she abides by the judgement of her own patriarch, her father, when he forbids her to marry Henry, she trusts that Phœbe knows best for Maria. But, “The Long Arm” suggests, Sarah should have known better. Though she never noticed it, the long arm of patriarchy was there all along. Rather than attest to the aberrance of lesbianism, therefore, the failure of Phœbe and Maria’s relationship and its violent end actually present a challenge to

the normalcy—or normativity—of patriarchy. Sarah is misguided not for trusting lesbians, but for trusting patriarchy, and Phœbe is not deviant because she is a lesbian, but because at some point in time, unnoticed by the comically clueless Sarah, she has begun to wield a patriarchal-type power over Maria, an oppressive force embodied, fittingly, in the phallic arm.

In a final twist on the symbolism of the arm, to the extent that it may be a representation of Phœbe's unique capacity for female violence, the story insists it is not so unique after all. In the moment in which it is revealed to Sarah, "Phœbe Dole's arm is fully seven inches longer than mine. I never noticed it before, but she has an almost abnormally long arm" (61). *Almost* abnormal, but not quite. Phœbe, like Sarah, is a liminal character. That "almost," neglected by critics, is, to me, the punch line of the whole story. Phœbe's arm may be longer than Sarah's, but Sarah, too, is capable of wielding "masculine" power, as her defence (and intimidation) of her father reveals. Ultimately, what Sarah fails to recognize over the course of the story is not Phœbe Dole's abnormal sexuality but the connection between her violence and Sarah's *own* familial oppression, both of which are defined within a patriarchal frame. (In other words, Sarah mistakenly reads the murders as an Alice Mitchell story, when in fact they are a Lizzie Borden story all along—a story not of stigmatized lesbian sexuality, but of female violence in general, of which Sarah, too, is capable of being driven by oppression.) The story thus suggests that there is no escaping the "long arm" of patriarchy—even within an intimate female partnership.

In fact, the title of the story supports this reading in another way, too. The most common evocation of the phrase, "the long arm," is in the context of the idiom, "the long arm of the law." (Rohy's article "The Long Arm and the Law" engages with the implications of the title in this context.) However, another meaning, less

common today but in popular usage in Freeman's time, referred to the long arm of coincidence. The "coincidence" in the long arm is that between the characters of Phoebe (lesbian sexual deviant) and Sarah (conventionally feminine heroine), who—despite the story's contriving of a phallic long arm—are not so different after all.

As this reading has shown, the "ostensible" connection to the Borden murders is both more convincing as well as enabling a more progressive and more meaningfully contextualized interpretation of the story than the more frequently embraced connection to the Mitchell-Ward murder. Reichardt has written of the story, "Ostensibly based on the Lizzie Borden slayings of 1892, more evidence suggests Freeman took her subject from the equally sensational Alice Mitchell case of the same year" (Reichardt *Web* 109). Reichardt's interpretation supports what Sharon Marcus points out: that critics offering symptomatic readings (like Sarah) often fail to see what's in plain view. Overlooking the Borden connection to probe more deeply its "repressed" Alice Mitchell allusion neglects vital points. Worse, it conceals the sense in which it is critics, not Mary Wilkins Freeman, who conflate lesbianism with violence and madness, and who thus enact what they purport to describe.

Chapter Two: Lizzie's "Dance of Death": Shifting Symbols in Agnes de Mille's *Fall River Legend*

On Thursday, April 22, 1948, the curtain rose at the Metropolitan Opera House to reveal the well-known dancer Alicia Alonso standing at the foot of a gallows looming profoundly against a dark sky. "The jurors on their oath present," an unseen speaker began, "that the accused of Fall River in the County of Bristol [...] on the fourth day of August in the year eighteen hundred and ninety-two feloniously, wilfully and of her malice aforethought in and upon the bodies of her father and upon her stepmother an assault did make, and with a certain weapon, to wit, an axe [...]" (de Mille *Dance of Death* 133). When the curtain fell less than an hour later upon the same scene, a new classic of the American Ballet Theatre repertory had been born.⁶²

The appearance of Lizzie in a new form might seem to attest to the existence of a transcendent Lizzie-Borden narrative. As noted in the Introduction to this thesis, transposability between media is one of Chatman's strongest arguments for the independent structure of narrative (Chatman 20). Rather than confirming the transcendent structure of narrative, however, world-renowned choreographer Agnes de Mille's balletic treatment of the murders, *Fall River Legend*, instead undermines the persuasiveness of the concept, namely by violating a previously defining event of the historical narrative and its subsequent fictionalisations: Lizzie's acquittal. Over the course of the ballet's meticulously crafted eight scenes, de Mille's protagonist, the unnamed "Accused," revisits the episodes of her life that have led her to kill: the

⁶² In preparing this chapter, I consulted a silent, black and white recording of the original production, starring Nora Kaye (for whom Alonso stood in for the first several performances), on reels held by the Agnes de Mille Foundation at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (Dance Division). I also consulted a DVD recording of the Dance Theatre of Harlem production, alongside assorted documentary rehearsal footage.

premature death of her mother, emotional abandonment by her father, and maltreatment by a conniving stepmother, who quashes a romance that constitutes the Accused's only chance at escape. The ballet culminates in the murders themselves, which are depicted not literally but symbolically, through a scene in which the Accused encounters her dead mother. At the end of the production, the action returns to the gallows, where the Accused faces execution.

De Mille's ballet is routinely examined through a Freudian lens as a balletic psycho-drama typical of its time. Dramatists began to engage with deeply psychological themes and motivations in the 1920s, with plays like John Barrymore's "Freudianized *Hamlet*" bringing psychoanalytic concepts such as the unconscious and the Oedipal complex to the attention of contemporary audiences (Cotsell 191). This interest in inner anxieties and hidden emotional drives grew during the 1930s, and by the end of the decade Antony Tudor's famous *Jardin aux Lilas* (1936) and *Dark Elegies* (1937), often performed alongside de Mille's works for Ballet Theatre, had inaugurated the genre of the "psychological ballet" (Macaulay). John Martin, who intuited immediately that Ballet Theatre had "a new hit on its hands" with *Fall River Legend*, described it as a "psychological melodrama" ("De Mille Ballet Praised"); of subsequent stagings, critics note "Freudian gestures" (Martin "The Dance") or "a dark, Freudian view" ("Here, There and Hollywood"). "A psychiatric report, in short, from childhood to the grave, in a prologue and eight scenes," Rosalyn Krokover reports. "Freud knew not what he spawned" (97). Carol Easton brings de Mille's biography to a Freudian reading of the ballet, focusing on the psychoanalytic connotations of the mother-daughter bond in relation to de Mille's vexed relationship with her own mother (278). "She may as well have written, '*Lizzie Borden, c'est moi*'" (Easton 282). Indeed, gestural

suggestions of emotional repression and the explosive climax of the ballet draw upon what de Mille calls “the legend of revenge and catharsis,” which “everyone who touches this case wishes to perpetuate” (de Mille *Dance of Death* 77). The triangularity of the familial relationships de Mille presents do lend themselves to an Oedipal reading, and de Mille’s own understanding is clearly influenced by psychoanalysis and often expressed in distinctly Freudian vocabulary. (In her book about the making of the ballet, *Lizzie Borden: A Dance of Death*, she sometimes refers to the murders or the ballet in terms of “identification,” “transference,” “repetition compulsion,” “catharsis,” etc.)

Ultimately, however, the psychoanalytic formulation that promises to fix or determine the meaning of the story (and thus foreclose interpretive possibility: “Oh, phew, Lizzie was just repressed, case closed!”) proves itself—as ever—to be no more than a comforting fiction. “It has been argued that she was sexually frustrated,” de Mille writes of Lizzie.

Mrs. Belloc Lowndes’s fictionalized treatment *The Borden Case* gives Lizzie a blighted love, and so do the various dramatic versions. *But fantasy and post-Freudian knowledge must not lead us astray.* Many hundreds of thousands of her age and kind were equally deprived who never thought to mend their state with an axe. Indeed most gentlewomen of the nineties were afraid of spinsterhood because of deprivations, real and appalling, on every level. (*Dance of Death* 121, my emphasis).

Freudian readings interpret the oppression de Mille depicts as *repression*, thus chalking patriarchy up to pathology and neutralizing the threat of rational (and for de Mille even legitimate) premeditation. Yet, the historicized reading de Mille favours here as an alternative or supplement to pure psychoanalysis emerges again and again in *The Dance of Death*. Indeed, the economic motive to which de Mille refers is crucial to an understanding of the ballet in context, as I will discuss in greater detail below. De Mille provides her Lizzie with a thwarted romance, but her choreographic

signs always suggest multiple resonances. The reduction of the characters to their symbolic function in a Freudian framework paints a picture much tidier than the bloody murders themselves and the troubling socio-political, historical realities at which they not-so-subtly hint, but such a reading does not adequately do justice to the story as “told.” Does the ballet support a psychoanalytic reading? Yes, but not just that, and not completely. De Mille is careful to ensure that conventional psychoanalysis never tells the whole story, never reveals the full picture of the narrative. It is an ideology she struggles with even while embracing it as a structuring framework.

“Revenge and catharsis,” trauma-repetition and Oedipal narratives tend to subsume nuances of the ballet that comprise some of its most compelling features. As I have already begun to suggest, the Freudian model fails to account fully for motive, but the loosening of the story’s Freudian ties also reveals other important backdrops for the ballet and its version of the murders, particularly the contemporaneous history of American dance, which provides a framework for rethinking the ballet’s representation of the mother-daughter bond; its use of flashback and emphasis on memory; and its central theme of material constraint. That psychoanalytic approaches to life and literature fail to account for the material reality of historical circumstance is in itself rather old news, so this chapter seeks to go a step further than the mere illustration of this well-known reality in relation to *Fall River Legend*. Drawing upon de Mille’s own account of the ballet in *Lizzie Borden: A Dance of Death* (1965) alongside other sources, this chapter examines *Fall River Legend* through a performative lens, attentive to its ambivalent negotiation of the material and the symbolic, the universal and the specific, constraint and possibility, among other performative themes. Ultimately, this

approach reveals the extent to which the ballet resists direct allegory (psychoanalytic, biographical, historical or otherwise) by destabilizing its own signs through complex shifts and slippages of meaning, “transferences” of signification achieved through literal substitutions and the evocation of unlikely parallels between characters and events. Collectively, this shifting quality serves to undermine the ballet’s deterministic overlay to emphasize the contingency of narrative/cultural meaning. This semiotic transience is accomplished through its characterizations, events, choreography, setting, costumes, and props, as well as through its cultural positioning.

Questions of performativity are relevant to *Fall River Legend*’s balletic form and its position within the contemporary history of ballet, as well as to its actual narrative.⁶³ Judith Mackrell notes that

[p]art of the problem for dancephobes is that dance *looks* quite similar to the way people act in the real world, even while it’s extravagantly deviant from normal behaviour, and the point of these fit human bodies doing whimsically impractical things seems irritatingly obscure. Yet for dance addicts the fact that the movement keeps sliding between reality and artifice is a source of its power. It means that dance can tell serious truths about men and women, even though it may be using intensely mannered choreography to do so. It also means that the dancers’ solid, sweaty flesh can be transformed into pure images of beauty. (2)

Indeed, dance’s bodily negotiation of the real and the represented, the material and the symbolic, draws attention to the process of transmission (and the physical circumstances of the production) of narrative/cultural meaning, a process often taken for granted in relation to the reading of a written text.

⁶³ The theoretical distinction between performance and performative is the subject of heated debate. Butler was criticized for inadequately explaining her understanding of the distinction in the *Gender Trouble* chapter on drag. Eve Sedgwick and Andrew Parker famously joined the two in their appropriately titled *Performativity and Performance*, engaging with the overlaps between the two concepts. Others, in contrast, such as J. Hillis Miller, argue for the need to distinguish more clearly between the two. (See Miller.) The performance/performativity issue is not a problem for this chapter because it will use “performance” to refer only to the literal staging of the ballet, reserving “performative” for the discussion of theoretical concerns central to this thesis.

Also of relevance to a performative consideration of a ballet are its paradoxical connotations of transience and immortality. Agnes de Mille's father, who objected to her passionate obsession with dance as a child, taunted her with the ephemerality of the art. In her memoir, *Dance to the Piper*, de Mille writes:

One night in his study with brandy in one hand and a cigar in the other, he asked quietly, "Do you honestly think, my daughter, that dancing has progressed since the time of the Greeks?"

"No," I replied snappily. "Do you think you write any better than Euripides?"

That ought to hold him, I figured.

He looked at me long and slow. "No, my dear," he said, "but we have Euripides's plays. They have lasted. A dancer ceases to exist the minute she sits down." As Father spoke I understood death for the first time. (72)

This transient quality of dance is in a sense its defining trait, its greatest strength and hardest felt weakness. There is indeed a very real sense in which dance "is only alive in the bodies of those who perform it" (Mackrell 8). From a practical standpoint, prior to the relatively recent development of a system for recording ballet, ballets were often lost or stored only in the memories of the dancers who danced them, sometimes having to be re-imagined from scratch for later restagings. Discussing this "ephemeral nature" of the balletic "product," Mackrell observes that

[d]espite sophisticated advances in video and notation, there's no completely satisfying way of reproducing a live dance performance. The complexity of what happens in a theatre on a particular night is lost for ever because there's no common object (like a book or a film or a painting) against which we can test our memories and opinions. (7)

At the same time, though, ballets are traditionally expected to signify on the level of the universal, to achieve timelessness. As de Mille writes, ballets "are designed to last and expected to pay off long hence—with immortality" (230), and elsewhere she notes, "Here, it is supposed, one makes the lasting statement. Here transience ends. Our big ballet companies are our treasury and repository, as well as our nursery"

(*Dance of Death* 141). In their literal transience and the simultaneous sense of the eternal they evoke, ballet as a form lends itself readily to performative interpretation.⁶⁴

The paradoxical relationship of ballet to time and universality is borne out in its negotiation of the old and the new. Ballet embodies “temporal drag,” asserting its novelty even as it cites its classical antecedents. In a passage that resonates very strongly with Freeman’s concept of “temporal drag,” Marion Kant writes,

Ballet has changed but never gave up its history, its link to the past: the invention of the ‘white ballet’ in the nineteenth century revolutionised and transformed a courtier’s code into the ‘woman question.’ Every time a ‘classical’ ballet is performed, it reminds us that the ‘woman question’ still has no satisfactory answer. But the shape in which it is presented has significantly been transformed. Those new and old forms transport new and old philosophical questions alike. (2)

Just as the donning of a disavowed political signifier can serve as a deconstructive tool, ballet’s gendered pasts accumulate in successive restagings to reveal the contingency of any given performance. A ballet performance only ever (re)contextualizes its hypostasized referent. It dons its “historical baggage” (Kant 3) physically; its temporal drag is experienced bodily, lived, and its audiences are implicated in it through their spacio-temporal experience of the performance.

American ballet did not appear on the international scene until the foundation of the Ballet Theatre by Lucia Chase in 1940. De Mille describes the prejudices the company faced in its early years, as it took on the difficult task of remaining relevant to its international contemporaries while simultaneously retaining a distinctively American style and encouraging the creative bents of its choreographers. Its high-art status was perceived as crucial to its success, and it often took pains to distinguish

⁶⁴ Ballet is often read performatively. See, for instance, Midgelow. For an introduction to Performance Studies, see Schechner.

itself from modern dance and from Broadway theatre, even as these boundaries were in many ways becoming blurred in practice. The “narrativity” of Ballet Theatre’s productions had to be balanced carefully against the aesthetic demands of its classical origins. Narrative in ballet is generally associated with the use of pantomime, a degree of gestural literalism, and the use of realistic sets, props, costumes, and so on. Because these techniques were associated with the “lower” art forms of modern dance and Broadway theatre, Ballet Theatre’s use thereof (and the correlated narrativity of its ballets) was both heavily influenced by and had direct implications upon its cultural positioning (and corresponding wealth and esteem).

De Mille relates fascinatingly to this complex context (in a way that, I might add, has nothing to do with her purported secret desire to marry her father). She is known today for both her popularization of ballet and her simultaneous elevation of the Broadway theatre, as well as for her subordination of dance to plot (“de Mille, Agnes” *World Encyclopaedia*). In 1948, she had done significant Broadway work; her hit *Oklahoma!* ran for five years (Edwards 234). Pantomime—as a means of conveying narrative—was an important aspect of her ballet style. Every gesture, every tiny nuance of the dance, had narrative significance. The music, characterization, the set, the props: all were expected to advance the plot. *Fall River Legend* is as a result a very narrative ballet, and it incorporates not only pantomime but ordinary, everyday gesture in its conveyance of plot. It uses realistic props, which de Mille is conscious of being a “breach of style” (*Dance of Death* 160), as well as realistic costumes and a realistic set. But these realistic elements always have symbolic as well as literal meaning, and they signify on multiple symbolic levels. In

Fall River Legend, a gesture is never purely narrative and never purely decorative, nor is any sign in any way unitary in its significance.⁶⁵

The haunting, mechanical rocking of Andrew, Abby, and Lizzie Borden in rocking chairs, for instance, with Lizzie framed between her father and stepmother, is both literal (the characters are literally rocking in rocking chairs, in the parlour of the house), a stylized gesture symbolizing the monotony of Lizzie's daily life in its endless repetition, and a physical representation of the changing relationships between the three characters as their relationships shift in space and time. Easton notes that "Each character has a signature gesture that is borrowed by other characters for purposes of comment and identification. When Lizzie speaks hopefully to the Pastor, she uses the gestures her dead mother used with her father. When she holds the axe, she reprises gestures she used with the Pastor" (280). The same gesture is also reprised in the scene of mother-daughter "transference," as I will discuss below, lending it yet another, unique and yet related, significance. Similarly, when at one moment the adult Lizzie revisiting her childhood leaps up onto her father's back, it is in one sense a literal evocation of a childish gesture, a tantrum; in another sense, it is an aesthetic, decorative balletic pose requiring the classical training of the performers. Symbolically, it reflects the character's desperation for her father's love and attention in the ballet more broadly and anticipates the withdrawal of that attention later. This action also relates to de Mille's biography (de Mille might well be identified with the adult Lizzie struggling desperately for her father's attention) as well as to the ballet's other allegorical resonances, as I will discuss in greater detail below.

⁶⁵ For more on the different ways in which balletic symbols function (in relation to a semiotic context), see Foster *Reading Dancing*.

So important was the functioning of gesture on multiple levels of signification to de Mille that it at least in part informed the basis on which she evaluated her performers. At one point, she writes of Nora Kaye in the role of Lizzie, “There was an aura of everlastingness about the way she rocked in a rocking chair, or rolled on the ground in misery. She let a hand drop as though letting fall hope forever” (166). Here, for de Mille, an individual movement can signify a whole temporal context, something eternal. Nora effectively brings out the multiple resonances of the ballet’s gestures, negotiating the real and the represented, the specific and the universal, and it is that for which she is prized. This multiple-functioning—which a purely Freudian reading eclipses—is revelatory for a performative reading in that it is the site of the ballet’s negotiation of the simultaneously determined and contingent status of cultural meaning. As I have suggested previously, *Fall River Legend* frequently replaces one connotation or level of signification with another, layering multiple meanings or resonances upon a single gesture, character, plot element or relationship. It evokes unlikely parallels, complicating direct allegorical readings.

The score Morton Gould composed for *Fall River Legend* provides a particularly compelling example of the ballet’s engagement with performative concerns, challenging conventional concepts of repetition and difference. Gould’s contemporaries often drew upon traditional American hymns and folk music (Goodman 190), and given the American content of the ballet and the folk interests of its choreographer, this was an option to consider for *Fall River Legend*. Gould opted instead to compose his own music, drawing upon traditional forms but inventing original melodies (de Mille *Dance of Death* 158). The music is thus at the same time familiar and novel, universal and specific. In fact, so familiar were the

melodies in their forms that they are occasionally mistaken for pre-existing songs. Robert Emmett Long, for instance, notes, “Gould scatters hymns and popular tunes of the period through his score to give it a context and universality” (49). On the contrary, though, Gould did not use popular tunes of the period; instead, he “chose to invent although he used old forms, and his fuguing tunes in the hymnal variations are highly atmospheric. But they are as new as his musical handling of them” (de Mille *Dance of Death* 158). The music “for the nocturne, the night of Lizzie’s loneliness [...] is an absolutely wonderful lyric piece in the manner of the best French composers, with a suggestibility almost Proustian [...] Yet it remains American and characteristically Gould” (*Dance of Death* 158-159). That Gould achieved such a high degree of familiarity through songs that were in fact his own original invention attests to the sophistication of their citational power. His score copies a non-existent original; it invents the tunes to which it seems to refer. The simultaneous evocation of the familiar and the unfamiliar resonates with the Freudian uncanny, but it also—and I would argue more persuasively—depicts the condition of performative possibility. In relation to temporal drag, the sense in which Gould’s pieces invent that which they seem to reprise calls into question the familiarity of the “originals” and the “reprisals,” as well as the privilege (or “universality,” as Long interpreted it) afforded a perceived original over its progeny.

De Mille’s concept of the creative process also resonates with performative themes. Far from a process of selecting details to play up or down from amongst a pre-set imaginable array, de Mille’s creative journey is characterized throughout by contingency, an undetermined quality borne out in the cultural text-in-context itself, demonstrating the newness, the (re)invention of the construct to which the versions seem to refer. Creative ideas come to de Mille after long periods of supreme effort

and frustration in often emotionally charged lightning-rod moments that spontaneously reveal what in retrospect seems inevitable. The matter of how to open the ballet, for example, is resolved in a split second: “It was one day in the middle of a ballet class, in the adage, to be precise, I had an idea which knocked me right off balance. The gallows! We would start with the gallows” (*Dance of Death* 133). This understanding of inspiration parallels revealingly de Mille’s understanding of the murders as both a slow-burn response and a sudden outburst. Balancing inevitability and spontaneity, de Mille seeks to portray the murders as both a response to “the gradual accumulation of distress” and as “climactic catharsis” “without...warning” (*Dance of Death* 134). As this thesis has explored, performances of interpretation or gender are both enabled and constrained by contextual conditions, existing both as just one among alternative possible performances and as determined by the regulatory contexts in which they are performed. Similarly, de Mille’s creative ideas are revealed spontaneously, as if out of nowhere, as if by chance or arbitrarily, as if just one of infinite possible inspirations; but paradoxically, at the same time, they are experienced as if obvious, as if in plain view all along, as if determined in advance, as if the only possible outcomes. The murders are positioned in parallel to inspiration within this analogy, at once spontaneous and inevitable. The ballet’s layering of multiple meanings upon a given gesture also emphasizes the simultaneously contingent and determined status of narrative meaning. One scene in which this narrative layering is achieved, a scene that also reflects de Mille’s somewhat playful defiance of viewer expectations in its surprising emotional pitch and depth, is Lizzie’s nocturnal encounter with the axe. In the gripping scene in which the idea of the murders first takes hold of Lizzie, her gestures are neither violent nor abrupt in the way a spectator might expect. Raging at her deprivations outside the house after

dark, she approaches the chopping block through a series of rapid turns en pointe (on the toes), stopping by the axe as if by accident. (In the filmed Dance Theatre of Harlem staging, the axe just catches the hem of Lizzie's dress, emphasizing its phallic symbolism.) She pauses and lifts a bent arm above her head, startled. She approaches the axe tentatively, gently presses her hands to either side of the end of the handle and very slowly rotates her head and shoulders around her fixed lower-body. After a complete rotation, she withdraws suddenly, distancing herself while letting her palms press slowly upon her torso, chest, stomach, hips, evoking pangs of feeling. She momentarily resumes her dance, as if putting the possibility represented by the axe from her mind, but then becomes aware of the axe once again. The dance then proceeds through repeated but varied stagings of Lizzie's alternate attraction to and repulsion from the axe, terminating in a solemn gesture of temporary resistance. Neither mad nor impulsive, the scene is one of realization and resistance, of deliberation and resolve, emotionally ample and complex.

Gould's score combines with de Mille's emotional interpretation of the scene to greatly enhance this effect. De Mille notes the counterintuitive mood of the music for this scene:

What quickly springs to mind as suitable axe music? Something sharp, percussive, vigorous, flashing? But consider what the axe signifies for Lizzie: it is her means of escape, her one possible entrance to happiness. As the axe gradually becomes a symbol for lover, her relationship to the household tool takes on yearning and tragic affiliation. The music chosen, therefore, was a love song, sad and sour, a love song lost and remembered as though all events which now confronted her had in fact happened long ago. (159)⁶⁶

⁶⁶ In a rehearsal, de Mille paraphrases these lines as she relays the story of the murders to the dancers: "Well, if you had to write music for an axe, what would you write? Chopping music? Staccato music? Marcato? High? Percussive? He didn't. He knew what the axe meant to her. It was her way out. He wrote the tenderest, tenderest, nostalgic melody, that reminded her of her childhood, that reminded her of her home, her happy home, and that reminded her of her lover. Very beautiful music" (*Fall River Legend: Excerpts*).

Indeed, the melody is romantic and lamenting, an emotional backdrop for the physicality of murder. During a rehearsal for a restaging of the ballet, de Mille coaches dancer Sallie Wilson in her portrayal of this scene. “When you’re doing this...,” de Mille explains, pressing her hands over torso and chest, “when you do this on your body, you’re feeling the blows of the axe, you’re feeling wounds, but you’re also feeling the lover’s hands, the lover’s kisses. It’s both. And you’re getting close to *the* mysteries, and it’s quite an awesome little moment here” (*Fall River Legend: Excerpts*). One of the ballet’s numerous narrative “transferences” of signification, the slippage between (or layering of) murderous premeditation and romantic reverie adds a richness of texture and sensitivity to the scene that complicates the violence it anticipates. It emphasizes the contingency of balletic symbolism as the condition of poetic possibility.

The most obvious “substitution” of this sort is the “replacement” of Lizzie’s acquittal with her execution, which signals de Mille’s interest in the contingency of cultural meaning. De Mille makes this choice, first suggested rather flippantly by Morton Gould, on the basis of the internal integrity of her ballet (the belief that acquittal would constitute an “anticlimax” [*Dance of Death* 139], for example) as well as certain formal constraints. The trial, for instance, she felt would be very difficult to convey. “I suggested a montage in depth, of Lizzie’s whole life and the people who had dominated her. The scene was to be played on three levels at once; but I think not even Brecht could have saved that scene. It was a triumph of unclarity” (*Dance of Death* 138). The result of de Mille’s decision, though, is profound and perfect. It is still one of the first things critics and scholars note upon mentioning the ballet. It might seem relatively uncontroversial to us now, but it is a decision de Mille agonized over for months, and which surely riled Borden buffs

everywhere.⁶⁷ Crucially for a performative reading of the ballet, the ballet's enactment of what it purports to describe offers a depiction of the condition of performative possibility, positioning the ballet as simultaneously enabled by (as in, literally inspired) but not determined by (bound to) history.

The ballet's most dramatic (and darkly playful) enactment of a substitution, transference or replacement is also that most heavily layered with complex and sometimes conflicting symbolic meanings. Indeed, it is the scene in which the ballet's biographical, Freudian and historical allegories most directly intersect, its maternal metaphor an overarching trope. Rather than depict the murders, an obvious climax, de Mille offers the aforementioned "dream" scene of "transference" between mother and daughter, a bizarre and haunting scene of surreal beauty and pain. Even in its premise, the scene both *depicts* a substitution (that of a daughter for a mother) and *enacts* one (that of the dream scene for the murders), thus already operating on multiple levels, shifting between form and content. "Should I show the murder?" de Mille considered in designing the ballet. "Better not. Violence on stage is nearly always silly. How indicate it then? What did the murder mean to Lizzie? It meant freedom, the reestablishment of love, and reunion with all she had lost. We would not show the hitting and chopping. We would show her in her dead mother's arms" (*Dance of Death* 137). Playful in its refusal of violence and melodrama, the scene shows mother and daughter meet among clouds of mist against a backdrop that is a surrealistic abstraction of the set, with its three chairs, blood rushing toward the foreground.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ William Kunstler, who had recently written a book on the murders, wrote a long article for the *New York Times* debating the ethics of the move (ultimately concluding in de Mille's favour, if on the basis of rather questionable logic).

⁶⁸ De Mille offers a description the planning of the set with designer Oliver Smith that is, characteristically, both moving and amusing. See *Dance of Death* 182-184.

The scene changed over the course of de Mille's composition of the production. In the original version, de Mille imagined a joyous reunion between mother and daughter. "Lizzie would be in her petticoat with great bloodstains on her skirts and corset cover. Her mother would take the bloody skirts off and wrap her own lace shawl about the girl, would lift her up, carry her, fly with her. They would race through space, united in freedom and light" (*Dance of Death* 137). Afterwards, her "unnatural passion for it driving her suitor, the minister, away," Lizzie would fix herself permanently in the house where "her own dead mother waits possessively, these two to be the sole tenants of the house for the rest of Lizzie's life," their "living immurement" lending an ironic twist to the reunion with her mother that the murders somehow enabled (*Dance of Death* 139). However, de Mille later rethought the scene, partly in light of the decision to cancel Lizzie's acquittal. The version of this scene that is actually performed begins similarly:

but since Lizzie is covered with blood, she must have been a naughty girl. Her mother is accordingly shocked and slaps her. And with this slap Lizzie is cast out from grace—from grace and from love. Neither heaven nor hell will have her, neither the dead nor the living; she must wander forever alone in timeless space.

And when she knows she is damned, a transference takes place. Since she has murdered, she becomes the adult and she picks up her mother in her arms to comfort her like a baby. She has become in fact the mother figure. I knew instinctively this must be so. With the crime Lizzie does find identity with her dead mother. She loses her love forever, but she replaces her. The murderess, Lizzie, cradles her mother with infinite unavailing love until they drift apart into mists of forgetfulness. (*Dance of Death* 137)

After the dance with her mother, the house reappears, but rather than "immuring" herself in it, Lizzie comes running through the doors, alone, to notify the town of the murders; her guilt is quickly recognized, and the scene moves, finally, to the gallows, where—in a horrifying moment—it ends.

De Mille's own understanding of the scene invites (provides, even) a biographical reading. She notes, as if in self-explanatory revelation, that the original scene was written while her own mother was still alive, the other, in which she "choose[s] to free Lizzie from the house," "significantly after" (*Dance of Death* 139). It is uncertain what de Mille understood as the seemingly obvious connection between the scenes and her life events, but given her interpretation in these lines, combined with the documented fact that she had undergone psychoanalytic counselling (Easton 139-140), the fact that the scene is often interpreted as evoking a Freudian context is unsurprising. The resulting interpretations, however, are often inadequately developed, lack precision, and feign to provide a solution rather than an interpretive tool. Easton, for instance, describes the ballet as:

in large part the result of Agnes's years in Freudian analysis, trying to work out her relationship with her parents. In Lizzie's dream dance with her beloved mother after the murder, she shakes her head compulsively, brushing tears ('of blood,' Agnes said) from her eyes. Expecting her mother's approval, she gets her wrist slapped for having bloodied her petticoat. (182)

Easton briefly quotes de Mille's own reading of the ballet, as I have done above, then—without any further interpretation—she offers her aforementioned conclusion: "She may as well have written *Lizzie Borden, c'est moi*" (282). But what does Easton mean to imply that the Freudian context actually lends to the biographical reading, in this case? To the extent the scene does offer Freudian symbolism, what do those symbols actually mean? How do they function in relation to the ballet more broadly, or in relation to de Mille's biography? De Mille's interpretation invites a Freudian reading in its use of the word "transference," and the fusing of the steps and gestures of the dancers as well as the literal transfer of the mother's shawl suggest some sort of transference is taking place, but the scene does not seem to depict a

straightforward transference in the strictly psychoanalytic sense. In psychoanalysis, transference is defined as a “displacement involving the redirection of emotions and attitudes from their original instinctual object on to a substitute, especially as occurs in the dependent, child-like, and often both sexually and aggressively charged relationship that a person undergoing therapy usually forms with the analyst, generally having features carried over (transferred) from earlier relationships, especially with parents” (“transference” *Dictionary of Psychology*). Psychoanalysis “brings to light [the transference relationship] so that it can be combated at the appropriate time. It has to be dissolved before treatment ends so that the patient can reassert his or her independence and resume an adult role” (Davis).

That there is a connection between the psychoanalytic concept and the scene, certainly as de Mille intended it, is fairly clear, but what that connection might be and how it might serve to illuminate either the ballet or the biography is highly ambiguous. In the scene that stands in for the murders, Lizzie might be interpreted as realizing that her hatred for her father and stepmother was a redirection of her anger and betrayal at the traumatic childhood loss of her mother. However, Lizzie assumes the “adult role” not by “working through” the transference relationship but by killing the substitutes. What does that substitution mean to suggest? Who, in relation to de Mille’s biography, might the murder victims be taken to represent? How do the murders relate to the death of de Mille’s mother within this reading, exactly? How does the original version of the scene, in which the happy reunion leads to permanent imprisonment, function psychoanalytically? Does the shift to the later version, in which Lizzie is freed from the house but left to the gallows, reflect a positive shift in de Mille’s conception of her relationship with her mother, or resignation? Answers to these questions within a Freudian framework might well be put forward, but my

point in raising them is to demonstrate that the answers are not obvious. There is more going on here than a simple psychoanalytic allegory can account for.

Once again considering alternatives to psychoanalytic interpretation, I would like to consider the relation of this scene and the ballet more broadly to the contemporary history of ballet. How might the mother-daughter bond, so vexed and prominent in de Mille's production, relate to American Ballet Theatre? I would argue that there is a very strong sense in which, upon reading *The Dance of Death*, one discerns a parallel between Lizzie and—on one level—the individual, modern ballerina of the 1940s-1960s and—on another level—American Ballet Theatre itself. Within such a reading, the mother figure may be understood to represent the unattainable ideal of the romantic ballerina, in all her physical hardship, as well as the traditional, European heritage of classical ballet at large.

I hinted earlier in the chapter at the political status of American ballet in relation to its international heritage as well as in relation to contemporaneous conceptions of the distinction between high- and low-art, acknowledging the impact of the ballet's historical positioning on its narrativity. Kant notes that in the era of modern ballet, "Dance had been 'done' but also written; it had become memory of physicality and incarnation had entered the intellectual sphere of European culture. By the early twentieth century ballet had to cope with its own history and the stereotypes and tropes it had created" (3). Coping with its (gendered) past was not always easy and very often physically and emotionally painful for those involved, as de Mille emphasises throughout the *Dance of Death* by focusing upon the constant sacrifices and setbacks faced by individual performers, choreographers, and others of those involved in ballet production; the company as a whole; and even the arts, in general. *Fall River Legend* positions balletic history as a mother figure from which

modern ballet was born, but against which it must constantly struggle, ever going back and forth between identification and dissociation, incorporation and expulsion. In doing so, the ballet presents a comment upon the stress and pressure of a relationship with the past from which American Ballet Theatre found itself utterly free and to which at the same time it was inexorably tied. The stakes of the engagement—the funding and esteem of the company and the international status of the American art form—de Mille regarded as incredibly high. De Mille was a passionate advocate for the role of the arts in society. She served on the American National Theatre and Academy (ANTA) Dance Panel, an organization that recommended artists to be sent abroad on tours for the purpose of cultural diplomacy and “established the policy guidelines to choose them,” from 1955 (Prevots 9), and sat on the first National Council on the Arts (Blake 175). The strength and continuation of American ballet, and the negotiation of a complicated heritage that continuation entailed, was always among her most pressing concerns.

Those concerns were made all the more pressing by the political climate of the Cold War, which rendered the engagement of modern, American ballet with past tradition and with its international contemporaries particularly challenging. Naima Prevot’s *Dance for Export* offers an excellent history of the highly significant role of American ballet in the Cold War conflict. In its introduction, Eric Foner describes the “long debates” on the Dance Panel of which de Mille was a member as to

the relative merits of classical ballet and homegrown modern dance as representations of American culture. Should the United States emphasize its indigenous dance achievements—modern dance, traditional folk dance, Native American dance—or its ability to compete with the Soviets on the terrain of classical ballet? Not surprisingly, the first company sent to the Soviet Union was not a modern dance group but the American Ballet Theatre, with a program featuring traditional works like *Les Sylphides*, as well as signature ballets on American themes such as [de Mille’s!] *Rodeo* [...]

demonstrating that the United States could not only produce dancers as technically accomplished as any in the USSR, but also ballets that surpassed in sophistication and complexity anything seen on a Soviet stage (4).

De Mille would thus have been very aware that American ballet was seen as a forum for “compet[ition] with the Soviets” and, indeed, as an international representation of American culture more broadly.⁶⁹ The pressure, therefore, to negotiate the classical merit, the modern originality and the distinctive American-ness of the ballet was particularly high. How to be creative in that context, how to innovate, how to negotiate repetition and difference?

Such questions of creativity within constraint relate complexly to a reading of the mother-daughter scene as an encounter between the modern and the traditional (as well as between the modern ballerina and her romantic antecedent). The scene’s almost obvious menstrual connotations (which despite the prevalence of Freudian readings and the interest of psychoanalysis in child development and sexuality have never—as far as I can tell—been acknowledged) emphasize the scene of transference from classical to modern ballet as the site of unprecedented (re)productive potential—and the failure to fulfil that potential.⁷⁰ (One recalls the de Mille image I introduced earlier of ballet as “our repository and our nursery.”) To the extent the scene might be interpreted as a scene of sexual awakening (whether the onset of menses or the loss of virginity, either of which are suggested by the bloodied white dress), it resonates with the uniquely sexualized modern ballerina as compared to her

⁶⁹ Ballet theatre went to Moscow twice, and de Mille’s ballets went with them. *Fall River Legend* was excluded from the repertoire on the first visit but allowed on the second, and de Mille reports it was the first ballet performed on the tour with which the Moscow audience seemed to meaningfully engage (*Dance of Death* 287-289).

⁷⁰ The historical Lizzie was supposedly menstruating at the time of the murders (See “Menstruation” [Appendix]); de Mille notes this in the case she makes for the likelihood of Lizzie as killer, noting “She could have covered her head and shoulders with clothes easily explained away later” (*Dance of Death* 116).

romantic and classical counterparts.⁷¹ The Accused in *Fall River Legend* has been described as “writhing obscenely” (Balanchine 216), and her rotating hips have been interpreted as symptomatic of repression (Easton 281). The ballet’s violent, emotionally charged and crudely sexualized coming-of-age moment speaks to American ballet’s coming into its own in the vexed international context of the Cold War, amid harsh material constraints.

The ballet’s focus on memory and flashback might be similarly reconsidered (outside their interpretation in relation to trauma as illuminated by psychoanalysis) in light of the ballet’s possible allusion to its own historical situatedness. Kant notes that ballet, “invents the past as much as the future” (1). In *Fall River Legend*, that sentiment is depicted literally, as past and present coexist on the stage, the modern ballerina (Lizzie) haunting her past (the scenes of her childhood) as it haunts her. Given the sense in which ballet “invents the past,” is it any wonder that the relationship between daughter and mother, between the modern ballet and the tradition it cites (and thus enacts as it purports to describe) is characterized in *Fall River Legend* by complex and shifting representations of transference?

Like the neglected Lizzie Borden allusion in Freeman’s “The Long Arm,” the ballet’s proposed historical allegory is neither a better, a more exhaustive, nor a mutually exclusive framework for its interpretation. In fact, in this case, in its simultaneity to the scene’s Freudian resonances, it serves as part of the ballet’s problematization of simple allegory, revealing cultural meaning not as determined by but contingent upon cultural context. Hence, accordingly, de Mille’s constant emphasis on the material conditions faced by dancers and dance companies

⁷¹ While certainly there was a change in the sexual status of the modern ballerina, this is not to say that romantic ballerinas were sexless—far from it. Mackrell notes that “Though the prototype for the Romantic ballerina was the elusive ghost or sylph, this didn’t mean these dancers lacked erotic appeal; it simply made their sexuality more tantalizing” (21).

(discussed in greater detail below). Emphasizing the contingency of the mother-daughter bond, for instance, that bond is assumed by various characters in *The Dance of Death*, who are variably identified with and dissociated from Lizzie (as well as from the historical and Freudian subject positions she paradoxically represents). By constantly shifting (indeed, re-contextualizing) the symbol of maternity, the simple identification of Lizzie with the modern ballerina or modern ballet is (like its Freudian implications) kept from fully defining the relationships of the ballet or the book *The Dance of Death*. Substitution and replacement are recurring themes in *The Dance of Death*, but the most compelling “transference” or substitution is that which occurs over the course of the creation of the ballet between Agnes de Mille and Lizzie herself, a connection or transference de Mille interprets as a prerequisite for its production.

Edward Sheldon suggested to de Mille that she write a ballet about the Borden murders years before the project came to fruition, and de Mille implies the delay was the result of her intervening success. It was not until she faced serious adversity that she began to relate to the character in a way that enabled her to begin to think about the story creatively. “For the [...] two years [after Sheldon’s suggestion] as I went about my affairs, a bit here, a detail there began gradually to clarify until at last the emotional mulch of my life seemed favourable—that is, I entered a period of great anguish, guilt, apprehension and rage” (*Dance of Death* 131). Facing the illness of her son, trouble at home and at work, “through this webbing and weaving of distress slowly pushed the dreadful inner knowledge of what it must feel to want to murder [...] Very slowly and in frightful psychological conflict I was gradually readied; Lizzie took me over” (131). After the decision to

hang Lizzie is reached (and, presumably, after the plot of the ballet was revised accordingly), de Mille writes,

This became now not only a tense and teasing story, but a meaningful one. I knew Lizzie somewhat in the dark garden waiting. I knew her better when she faced the axe and her body quivered with lust and fear as though shrinking from a caress like a violation. But I knew her indeed as she stood under the gallows. I knew the real Lizzie and the inner Lizzie which I had peeled the historic figure down to and extracted like a core. The inner Lizzie turned out to be me, and I knew myself. (158)

In all their psychological language and implications of an unconscious inner core, these lines are compelling from a performative perspective for a number of reasons. First of all, that de Mille's "stripping down" of the historical Lizzie leads not to the "real Lizzie" but to the "real de Mille" emphasizes the extent to which at the heart of the Borden story is not a transcendent narrative for the manipulating but the performative, interpretive processes and functions of versioning itself. Also, though, they position creative possibility as existing precisely at the moment of engagement with history. Apart from its implications for a Freudian reading of the ballet (in which, perhaps, one might argue that coming to terms with one's past is necessary to overcoming one's neuroses), this suggests for a performative reading an embodied negotiation of past and present as the site of possibility.

Further emphasizing the contingency of the engagement (in contrast to a simple Freudian alignment), the association of de Mille with Lizzie is evoked alongside various other shifting identifications. To the extent that de Mille is aligned with Lizzie (daughter), Lucia Chase might be interpreted in a maternal role. De Mille often endorses this formulation, remarking at one point, for instance, that Chase "is the Phoenix mother and can rise to anything" (*Dance of Death* 186), and elsewhere she says of her, somewhat sardonically, "Mother knows best, and advice, she has

found, even from experts, is often slanted” (*Dance of Death* 190). Easton likens de Mille to the “step-child” of the company, and notes the appropriateness of Chase’s actually portraying the role of the stepmother in later performances (279). To the extent that the scene has Freudian significance, this is the biographical relationship with which it most resonates: de Mille’s conflict with Chase as the expression of her anger and dissatisfaction with her own mother, exposed as a “transference relationship” only on the death of de Mille’s actual mother. How truly does this relationship “translate”⁷² to the ballet, though, and—again—what are its broader implications? If Chase is the balletic stepmother and de Mille’s own mother the balletic mother, what of their respective fates in the ballet? What is the role of the balletic father in relation to de Mille’s own? What does death at the gallows signify in terms of de Mille’s understanding of her own life? Once again, the Freudian reading provides a general context but an unspecific allegory, a comment upon the lived opacity of the relationship between text and context.

The comment upon the inevitable contingency of textual meaning in context, advanced through the inadequacy of the de Mille/Chase connection to determining the meaning of the mother-daughter relationship, is further extended through the layering of signification upon the “Lizzie” position within these various allegories. Although Chase is often associated with mother or step-mother in *The Dance of Death*, as icon of American Ballet Theatre, she is also often identified with Lizzie (and thus with modern ballet), particularly in what de Mille represents as their shared wilfulness and ability to act under heavy constraints. The history of the actual portrayal of Lizzie emphasizes the contingency of the role: the role was written with

⁷² De Mille entitles her chapter on the adaptation of the ballet from her historical research and her personal experience “The Translation” (*Dance of Death* 129).

Nora Kaye in mind, but with Nora Kaye struck suddenly ill before the opening week, Alicia Alonso was asked to step in. However, having had no rehearsal of the part, Alonso had to be trained. The obvious woman for the job was Dania Krupksa, who had been rehearsing the ballet step for step with a cast of other “dummies” (Broadway dancers) de Mille routinely hired to stand in for the Ballet Theatre dancers during the choreographing of a ballet while the troupe was on tour (*Dance of Death* 160). This caused a huge uproar, and eventually Krupksa agreed to teach Alonso the ballet only on the promise that she would be allowed to perform in one actual performance during the opening period. Her request was granted. Needless to say, the substitutions I have relayed very briefly here were in fact fraught with pressure and tension, anger and all sorts of other emotions; indeed, it is to the complex politics of the relationships involved that de Mille devotes much of her book. The result, though, is a Lizzie role so complexly characterized and layered that at one point, during a rehearsal, we are treated to de Mille standing as Krupksa, teaching Alonso to stand in for Kaye. It is quite tellingly at precisely this moment, at the role’s most complexly layered and overdetermined moment, that the ultimate emotional impact (and transcendence) is achieved:

Dania stood for Alonso (who was [rehearsing another ballet she was to perform] with [choreographer Anthony Tudor]) and I stood in front of Dania improvising, and since all I had to do was stand still clasping and unclasping my hands and being emotional, I am convinced I was superb. I turned and faced the gallows.

It was an awful moment.

The music screamed and split, and there was the core of my life—the gallows—and there was death and I.

When I stopped I was trembling.

[...] Now we had to transfer all this on to the Ballet Theatre company. (*Dance of Death* 195)

That such an undeniable climax is achieved at the exact moment in which the story’s biographical allegory is at most complex, its least direct, attests to the importance of

contingency, indeed, of performativity, to the ballet's concept of its relation to the world.

Tellingly, as I have begun to suggest, the thread that most clearly links the ballet's various levels of signification is not Freudian deep structure but the very plain fact of the motivating power of material need. The power of money (and the will of its pursuers) operates on every allegorical level of *Fall River Legend*, triggering unlikely and sometimes subversive parallels between characters, plot elements, and contextual strands. Money is the main focus of de Mille's discussion of Lizzie's New England and functions heavily in her characterization of Andrew. She begins her discussion of the chapter in which she outlines the main "facts" of the crime with a description of a Fall River community for whom, "Material things were [...] the chief realities of life. Those who had money nursed it. The poor served as a constant reminder of its value [...] This feeling of money and the power of money as a manifestation of God's will, lies at the heart of our story" (*Dance of Death* 13-14). Having given a thorough economic overview of this context, she swiftly moves into her characterization of Andrew, associating him closely with the social and economic contexts she has just described, exaggerating his widely suggested parsimony. "Legend has it that he was sparing of coffin wood and cut off the feet of clients when necessary for accommodation to boxes already in stock. He boasted that he had never borrowed a dollar; it is safe to assume that he never lent one. His record, even for New England, was formidable" (*Dance of Death* 16).

Correspondingly, de Mille emphasizes Lizzie's dependent financial situation—*explicitly* as distinct from psychological factors—as a major motivating factor in the murders. She focuses much of her chapter on "The Crime" on the constrictive arrangement of the Borden home, "utterly devoid of grace or charm"

(*Dance of Death* 20), noting that “the emotional schism in the family was reflected in the physical layout of the rooms” (21). She offers a detailed floorplan of the Borden home and devotes several pages to description of its arrangement.⁷³ She emphasizes the social deprivations that result from Lizzie’s financial denials—the lack of opportunities to entertain friends, the poor food (the famous mutton), the monotony of Lizzie’s daily life, and so forth—and at last “the world falls apart and cracks before [Lizzie’s] simple ‘Give me’” (*Dance of Death* 120). Probing the financial motive in depth, de Mille asks, “What did happiness mean to a thirty-three [sic]-year-old spinster in 1892?”:

She had given up all thought of marriage. She couldn’t take a job; no lady of her day could. Her own property and income were small. Mr. Borden permitted each of his middle-aged daughters \$200 annual pocket money, and he was praised for this. Think how she was situated, how hemmed in, how helpless. In those days there was only one compensation for the lack of a husband—money. [...]

With the first blow on Mrs. Borden’s skull, Lizzie and Emma stood in direct line to become rich and free women. With the first blow on Mr. Borden’s head, the circumstance was achieved. This is not fantasy; this is fact [...]

Two hours of brisk activity in that closed and sultry house and as a reward, The World! (124)

In contrasting the financial motive to the psychological one by rejecting Freudian “fantasy” as an explanation of motive, de Mille draws specific attention to the material constraints to which she positions the murders as a response.⁷⁴

The strong emphasis on frustrated financial drive as motivating violence resonates complexly with American Ballet’s theatre’s Cold-War cultural status,⁷⁵ but

⁷³ See “The House” (Appendix).

⁷⁴ Correspondingly, de Mille objected to Nora Kaye’s “hysterical” interpretation of the murders, which correlated to a Freudian interpretation of the murders but not to the historical one de Mille favours (*Dance of Death* 223).

⁷⁵ De Mille notes that “It is the common belief throughout the world that America is money-mad,” and that “[t]his idea takes hold because it is largely true” (14). However:

other cultures have ways of masking greed. There are antique rights, caste systems, vested splendours semireligious in nature, there is tradition and patronage [...] We Yankees did not inherit our wealth; we made it, and what’s more, we were told and

perhaps more pertinently for a consideration of performative themes, the emphasis on financial drive serves the allegorical alignment of Lizzie and American Ballet Theatre within the contemporaneous history of dance. In *The Dance of Death*, de Mille strongly emphasizes the oppressive impact of financial need on Ballet Theatre and its choreographers, dancers, and other employees. Throughout the book, she provides descriptions of the long hours, harsh conditions and inadequate wages to which employees of the ballet are subjected and emphasizes the economic unfeasibility of private funding of the arts.

Evoking similarities in their mutual oppressive exploitation through financial deprivation, de Mille creates an unlikely but compelling parallel between the need to carve a place for American ballet (and particularly modern, narrative American ballet) on an international stage and Lizzie's need to escape the domestic oppression of the Borden family. Just as *Fall River Legend's* Accused struggles with her own ambivalent past and (pro)creative frustrations, the American Ballet theatre fights for its identity and the realization of its creative potential under the heavy strain of ballet's "historical baggage." Just as she is hanged for her crimes, likewise will American Ballet theatre fail if uncultivated and deprived of financial freedom, de Mille suggests.

By aligning Lizzie and American Ballet Theatre in this way, de Mille presents a complicated concept of the agency required for social change. Writing in her final pages of the murders, she notes, "Lizzie is the first heroine of the defiant

proved that we could make it, every one of us, given energy and happy circumstances. This was a new idea and one not current elsewhere. [...] We established power through money. (15)

Such a view (especially as a context for the murders) has implications for the image of America the country sought to project to the world during the Cold War. For some useful background on this context, see Prevots, who explores the possible use of ballet as Cold War propaganda but concludes ballet selected by the Dance Panel was not significantly influenced by this purpose, emphasising the aesthetic value of the art form over its potential political impact.

young. The young are no longer to be put upon to the vile point of extinction. When the mold of life becomes intolerable, the mold is broken” (*Dance of Death* 292). As she puts it more plainly, with comedic understatement, describing orally to her team of dancers the physical damage Lizzie’s blows did to the skulls of her victims, Lizzie’s whacks “made a difference” (*Fall River Legend: Excerpts*). So, de Mille suggests, did American Ballet theatre, in “breaking the mold” of classical ballet and innovating under the harshest conditions. When, in the ballet, Lizzie “transfers” from daughter to mother, the murders are positioned as (re)productive—as generative of a positive future. Like American Ballet Theatre, which was forced to shut down after a brilliantly successful season due to bankruptcy (a consequence of the unfeasibility of privately funded ballet), Lizzie faces her personal downfall (death by hanging); but like the ballets funded by Chase’s continuing investment into the sinking ship that was then American Ballet Theatre, de Mille regarded Lizzie’s murders as “pay[ing] off long hence” (*Dance of Death* 230). Upon the murders, de Mille imagines,

The community apparently sighed and remarked, ‘High time!’ and with this toleration fell bastions of tradition. Driven sufficiently one could at last kill, and generation after generation has thought back with horrified relief to that still house in the August heat, the hollyhocks fainting in the humidity outside, and inside vengeance ripe and hate provoked moving steadfastly toward doom and release.
(*Dance of Death* 292)

While the omnipresence of the financial drive may seem as deterministic as oversimplifying Freudianism, even in its most determining function it remains characterized by contingency. In the *Fall River Legend* ballet, the financial motive is not articulated explicitly. Aesthetically, de Mille felt it was unfeasible to depict in balletic form the financial desire she felt motivated Lizzie. As de Mille puts it, “Murder for real estate is impossible to dance.” The determining power of material need, however, is symbolized in the form of the house, which remains on stage at all

times and incorporates the looming gallows. De Mille describes the house as a “fourth protagonist” in the ballet, “the house itself, which played a crucial part in all events and devoured Lizzie in the end” (131). The house provides an omnipresent sign for the material constraints that push the Accused to kill.

While omnipresent, however, the house is also the ballet’s most overt symbol of contingency and ephemerality. Indeed, the set offers one of the ballet’s most complex and compelling manifestations of the determined/contingent dichotomy. De Mille describes the set:

Lizzie’s house is a transparent skeleton, consisting mainly of uprights and a stair. It is furnished with three rocking chairs, a newel lamp of 1880 vintage, and heavy portieres. These details are realistic and in period. The rest of the set is a mere anatomy. It swings around completely and its back side becomes a New England church; its centre platform with rug and curling, wicker chairs pulls forward to the footlights so that the heart of the tragedy can be examined as under a microscope, and is retrieved back into place into its proper complex when the action becomes broader, more general, more formal and less specific; finally, the house tears open, separates, and flies away at the crisis to reveal the rot at the core, the bone, the horror, the gallows.
(*Dance of Death*180)

Paradoxically, the set both suggests and denies the possibility of depth. It plays on the irony of Lizzie being trapped in a house with an open front (three walls). She can come and go as she pleases, but she can never leave the stage; she is ensconced in a system of oppression. The scene opens with the gallows, so although de Mille above implies it is hidden “at the core,” it is in fact in plain view, calling for attention to “surface” rather than depth. (Even the literal depth of the house shifts, extending when the chairs are moved forward and contracting when they are moved back.) The house, the church, the parlour, the gallows are always there, suggesting the predetermined, inevitable aspect of the murders, but the set transforms seamlessly from one to the other; the entire setting is contingent upon perspective, positioning.

One moment it is the oppressive, private interior of the Borden parlour, the next it is the public realm of the church. (In this possibility, the set engages with both internal and external influence upon Lizzie and her murders.) One moment it is the house, the material object of Lizzie's desire, the next it is the gallows, the mechanism of her death. At the same time, it is always already both. Furthermore, the perspective changes not at will, automatically, but only through the deliberate effort of the dancers (who ultimately represent the will of the choreographer). Whereas normally set changes are not part of the action, carried out by stage hands who may or may not be seen, in *Fall River Legend*, the dancers themselves enact the change, to the music; it is part of the ballet itself. The house, then, may be understood as an omnipresent, inescapable, predetermined symbol of contingency itself, a paradoxical performative function accentuated by the manual participation of the dancers in its positioning.

Fall River Legend is self-conscious about its use of the Lizzie story for a culturally-influenced, historically-situated purpose in a way previous versions were not. Taken together with *The Dance of Death*, it is in some ways a ballet *about* the figure of Lizzie Borden standing in to fill a cultural (as well as professional and personal) need generated by anxiety and manipulated to serve a specific purpose. It expresses this self-consciousness by constantly challenging the signification of its own symbols, shifting and layering meaning to emphasize the contingency of the narrative even as its representation seemingly attests to its independent fixity. Resisting direct allegory by undermining the all-encompassing power of Freudian, biographical or historical frameworks, the ballet presents a unique and powerful version of the Lizzie Borden murders emphasizing the engagement with history as a site of possibility as well as of struggle, and challenging—while at the same time drawing upon—the concept of narrative as transcendent of medium. *Fall River*

Legend presents itself as feeding back into the cultural narrative it challenges by disavowing its ending, presenting itself self consciously as one of possible alternative versions. At the same time, through its shifting symbols and its powerfully contingent resonances between form and content, it makes the story look like it was written for ballet, like this version was the only version it could ever have been. This, in short, is a performative feat.

Chapter Three: “How Unbearably Heavy These Skirts Can Be”: Popular Feminism in 1970s America and *The Legend of Lizzie Borden*

The Lizzie Borden of 1975 American primetime is explicit in ways the previous versions this thesis has examined are not: explicitly named (Lizzie), explicitly murderous (with on-screen axing), and explicitly sexual (portrayed by an erotic icon who whacks in the nude). Like *Fall River Legend*, *The Legend of Lizzie Borden* focuses on the events that may have led Lizzie to kill, uses flashback extensively, and suggests both economic and psychological motivations. Unlike *Fall River Legend*, however, *The Legend of Lizzie Borden* is ambivalent about the guilt of its protagonist and confounds the causal clarity of de Mille’s rendering. Starring Elizabeth Montgomery of *Bewitched*⁷⁶ fame, *The Legend of Lizzie Borden* aired during primetime on network ABC.⁷⁷ Its production coincided with the prominence of the women’s liberation movement in popular media, the increased prevalence in cinemas of films presenting the family as a site of horror (*Psycho* [1960], *The Exorcist* [1973], *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [1974]), and the burgeoning popularity of the made-for-TV movie, which by the 1970s had become a “mainstay” of American viewing (Hutchings 182-191, Gomery 252). A made-for-TV family horror, *The Legend of Lizzie Borden* thus resonates in both its form and its content

⁷⁶ *Bewitched* has received significant scholarly attention. For a useful introduction, see Metz. For a feminist reading of the sitcom, see Douglas 126-138

⁷⁷ Montgomery’s previous post-Samantha roles, through which she clearly strove to dissociate her image from mischievous nose-twitching, had included *The Victim* (a thriller), *Mrs. Sundance* (a Western), and *A Case of Rape* (a courtroom drama), the last of which received higher Nielsen ratings than any television movie ever had before (Bevacqua 126) and appeared at number 32 on *Variety*’s list of all-time television hits (Rapping 14). *Legend* was nominated for a “Best Motion Picture Made for TV” Golden Globe, and Montgomery was nominated for an Emmy (Deal 97).

with 1970s American popular culture.⁷⁸ Its relation to its contexts, however, is far from straightforward. The role of media representations of women in determining the cultural status of “woman”—the question, in other words, of the performativity of popular portrayals, of the interplay between popular texts and their cultural contexts—was a major focus of the second-wave feminist debates with which the film was contemporaneous. This chapter will consider the film in relation to these second-wave feminist contexts, emphasizing its tensions and contradictions to consider the complex cultural functioning of popular media through a performative lens.

Understanding the relationship between *The Legend of Lizzie Borden* and its particular feminist contexts entails a consideration of broader debates surrounding the relationships between women, feminism, and pop culture more generally.⁷⁹ Betty Friedan’s bestseller *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) drew unprecedented attention to the idea that media images could socialise women into subordinating stereotypes of femininity. Popular culture became a major cause for feminist concern, as “study after study showed that women were severely underrepresented on television, and that the ones we saw were exceptionally attractive, slim, sociable, accommodating, dependent, helpless, incompetent, and under thirty-five” (Douglas 200). Critics began to explore the impact of pop-culture images on women as readers, viewers, and consumers, examining how women relate to these images and how pleasure is derived from their consumption.⁸⁰ Later critics more fully embraced the variety of ways in which pop-culture texts signify meaning and the range of reader/viewer

⁷⁸ Neroni footnotes the influence of 1970s feminism on *Legend’s* shaping of the Lizzie Borden story in *The Violent Woman*.

⁷⁹ For a detailed overview of the history of the relationship between feminism and cultural studies, see Hollows.

⁸⁰ See, for instance, Modleski, Tuchman, and Radway. Laura Mulvey’s highly influential “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” emerged from a roughly parallel moment in film studies, specifically.

experiences that can be generated by a single text, thus to some extent breaking down the opposition between feminism and popular culture and opening up the possibility for (at least partly) resistant readings.⁸¹ This latter tradition exposes the contingency of the relationship between popular texts and their cultural contexts, not only in terms of intention/reception but from a broader perspective sensitive to the historical situatedness of narrative meaning.

The Legend of Lizzie Borden aired on the very cusp (or, perhaps more accurately, at almost the exact climax) of enormous change both within the American women's movement and in its relation to popular culture. *TIME* magazine designated "American Women" its "Person of the Year" for 1975, a year of which it declared, "[F]eminism has transcended the feminist movement. In 1975 the women's drive penetrated every layer of society, matured beyond ideology to a new status of general—and sometimes unconscious—acceptance" ("Person"). What *TIME* interpreted as maturation and acceptance, however, feminist historians tend to identify as deradicalisation and a dramatic change in the nature and reduction in the quantity of devoted media coverage. Bonnie Dow notes that many feminist histories single out 1975 as the year by which "radical feminist groups and visibility had almost disappeared" and from which point "liberal feminist concerns like the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment] would dominate the movement and the media" (Dow 64).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the women's movement had received a great deal of media attention, exemplified most clearly, perhaps, in the sensational reporting of the Women's Strike for Equality in 1970 (Douglas 163-191). As numerous scholars have noted, such popular representations of feminism played a

⁸¹ See, for instance, Seiter or Brunsdon, among many others.

significant role in defining the women's movement for the millions who consumed them (Hollows 2). Some representations from this period were accurate and/or sympathetic, but others were dismissive, critical, or even mocking, emphasising tensions within the movement and tending to divide feminism into "legitimate" and "illegitimate" varieties, endorsing the most liberal, equality-based causes while condemning the more radical (Douglas 186; quoted in Dow 28). By 1975, Betty Friedan had been replaced in the public eye by the more liberal (and more readily mainstreamed) Gloria Steinem, and it was becoming clear that the version of feminism that was to dominate popular media thereafter was one more easily reconciled with the mainstream values of liberal individualism than versions advocated by more radical strands in the earlier years of the movement.⁸²

The relationship between these contexts and *The Legend of Lizzie Borden* is far from straightforward. In fact, so inadequate are the conventional terms of "endorsement" or "rejection," "subversion" or "reinforcement," to the task of describing the diverse ways in which the movie engages with feminist ideology, that the analysis of the film serves helpfully to emphasize the performative status of any such text/context link. Television seemed to respond to this cultural moment ambivalently. On the one hand, it offered sometimes quite explicit representations of feminist content, while on the other hand it often positioned those representations in contexts that critics interpreted as tending to limit their political implications (Douglas 201-219; Dow 24-85).⁸³ *The Legend of Lizzie Borden* both reflects and complicates this trend: while it does indeed engage sometimes quite explicitly with what it implies are its self-evident cultural contexts, it also limits that engagement

⁸² For a detailed reading of Steinem's role in this history, see Dow 29-32.

⁸³ As Dow notes of Mary Tyler Moore, for example, "Mary Tyler Moore draws on the presence of second-wave feminism as a way of giving 'relevance' to its rhetoric; at the same time it produces a vision of feminism that is a selection, deflection, and reflection of various available discourses" (49).

and frames its feminist content in such a way as to undermine its subversive potential. However, the straightforward relationship between text and context whereby a text could *determine* the consequences of its engagement with context is, in reality, a misleading construct. In fact, *The Legend of Lizzie Borden's* unique positioning at a feminist (and generic) crossroads makes it a tellingly convoluted testimony to the extent to which that relationship can never be so clear cut. The violent content the film juxtaposes with what might otherwise have been interpreted as a typically limited engagement with feminist discourse undermines both its containment—its “(tele)vision,” to borrow Dow’s term—of feminism and its formal coherence (53). Within its discordant plotlines and characterisations play out some of the most politically-charged dichotomies with which feminism was then (and is still) grappling: radical/liberal, sameness/difference, individual/collective, personal/political.⁸⁴

This chapter examines *The Legend of Lizzie Borden's* conflicted representation of feminism as reflected in its contradictory depictions of Lizzie’s self-control and self-awareness, the nature of her implied motives, and her generalisability as a character. In brief, *The Legend of Lizzie Borden* presents a Lizzie who is both in control and self-aware and out of control and unconscious. Correspondingly, it presents Lizzie’s motives as deriving simultaneously from greedy premeditation and from incest-damaged entrancement, offering an absurd proliferation of explanatory and thus, in a sense, excusatory storylines. Through the bizarre overdetermination that results, *The Legend of Lizzie Borden* manages to suggest both that every woman has reason to kill and that Lizzie is a monster unlike any other woman. Paradoxically, the film depicts Lizzie as both readily generalisable

⁸⁴ For a contemporaneous feminist reading of the film, see Taylor.

and amenable to viewer identification and at the same time uniquely Other and distanced from viewer sympathies. In a sense, *The Legend of Lizzie Borden* confines its essentialised version of feminism to the past and severely limits the scope of its applicability, thus positioning it as safely remote from both the needs and desires of the film's target audience and the violence that is its subject—and any potentially dangerous combinations thereof. The result, though, is a confused and deeply conflicted portrayal reflecting serious anxieties about the power of feminism. By examining the relationship between the political contexts of the 1970s and *The Legend of Lizzie Borden*'s appropriation of popular American second-wave feminism for and as mainstream entertainment, this chapter offers new insight into the complicated ways in which text and context interact, emphasizing this interaction as the basis for interpretive potential and, thus, performative possibility. The failure of *The Legend of Lizzie Borden*'s attempts to contain the consequences of its engagement with feminism, reflected in its formal and thematic convolution, attests to the fact that texts are best understood not as purely conveyors, reflectors, agents, or symptoms of their historical circumstances but performatively, as engaged in a complex interplay made legible as a consequence of the historical situatedness of the interpreter.

The film trades upon an un-self-conscious concept of the relationship between text and context that downplays the performative selectivity by which that relationship is characterized. In fact, it *creates* the tensions and contradictions it purports merely to depict, linking its own ironies and inconsistencies of plot and character to the feminist contexts it evokes. In one scene, for example, protestors throng the outside of the courthouse during Lizzie's trial. Women hold signs that read "Lizzie Borden is innocent," "We love you Lizzie," "Sisters together," and

“Equal Rights for Women,” roaring for her release. The historical Lizzie was a member of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and other community groups, and she did receive their support during her trial, but it is unlikely that support took a form so uncannily evocative of the real-life protests familiar to 1970s viewers.⁸⁵ The depicted placards would almost certainly have resonated with viewers exposed to the extensive media coverage of second-wave protests in the late 1960s and early 1970s, like those that accompanied the 1968 Miss America pageant, for instance, or the aforementioned Strike for Equality. The scene thus creates a parallel between Lizzie’s depicted first-wave supporters and a liberal version of second-wave feminism. By doing so, the text appropriates visually and thematically an element of what it represents as its own contemporaneous contexts in order to suggest a trans-temporal continuity between first and second wave feminism.

The generational model was one often deployed by second-wave feminists, sometimes to increase the legitimacy of the movement by playing up its heritage (Henry 53), but in this scene, the link is a problematic one. Lizzie’s feminist backers are misguided in the basis for their support. They back Lizzie out of sympathy for her based upon a belief in her innocence, innocence assumed precisely because of gender stereotypes. One of the film’s crucial ironies emerges through this scene: “Equal Rights for Women” is actually the worst-case scenario for a self-aware Lizzie hoping to take advantage of a prejudiced justice system, because her plan for acquittal actually depends on sexist treatment by the court. If Lizzie plotted and executed the murders in anticipation of a trial shaped by sexist stereotypes surrounding female capacity for violence, a trial free from gender bias would

⁸⁵For a discussion of the support the historical Lizzie received from women’s groups, see Nickerson 268 or Jones 235-236.

presumably result in her conviction. Thus, *The Legend of Lizzie Borden*'s best hope for an empowered, self-aware heroine requires the denial of the "equal rights" called for by the depicted protesters. In presenting this contradiction, the film suggests that feminism's goals are impossible: women cannot be innocent and empowered, and to be empowered is to be guilty. By conflating guilt and empowerment, *The Legend of Lizzie Borden* undermines the legitimacy of the liberal second-wave feminist goals of consciousness-raising and equality, positioning them as misguided in relation to the plot and thus foreclosing the possibility of female power in the film.

The Legend of Lizzie Borden's tensions are connected still more explicitly to feminism in a remarkable scene in which the prosecuting lawyer, Hosea Knowlton, has a conversation with his wife regarding her opinion on the murders. Earlier in the film, Prosecutor Knowlton has dismissed public sympathy for Lizzie as "cheap feminist sentimentality." Here, he accuses Lizzie of "hiding behind her skirts." Mrs. Knowlton jumps to Lizzie's defence:

Mrs. Knowlton: What else has she? I'm sorry, Hosea. It's just that it seems to me that you men have only yourselves to blame if women hide behind their femininity as a last defence. After all, you cast us in this role.

Mr. Knowlton: You look upon your womanhood as a role, my dear?

Mrs. Knowlton: It's not always a convenient part to play.

Mr. Knowlton: I've never heard you talk like this. Next you'll be asking for the vote. I gather you sympathise with this murderess?

Mrs. Knowlton: She has not as yet been found guilty, Hosea.

Mr. Knowlton: But you do sympathise with her.

Mrs. Knowlton: Certainly not with her deeds, but perhaps with her motives.

Mr. Knowlton: Her motives? Now, what would you know about her motives?

Mrs. Knowlton: I should think a great deal, Hosea. You have no idea how unbearably heavy these skirts can be at times.

This scene seems to voice through Mrs. Knowlton a feminist interpretation of the murders as arising out of a frustration with or even constituting a rebellion against conventional Victorian gender roles. It invites female viewers to identify with their historic antecedents. It suggests the performativity of gender and pokes fun at Hosea's ignorant attitude towards suffrage. A slow zoom into Mrs. Knowlton's face during her final lines seems to privilege her perspective, and the way in which the smoke from her husband's cigar pervades the frame at the end of this scene evokes visually the pervasive universality of patriarchal oppression. This moment is also different from earlier portrayals of support for Lizzie in the nature of Mrs. Knowlton's defence. Mrs. Knowlton's remarks relate to feelings she imagines Lizzie to have as a woman. Based on her own experience of such feelings, she empathises as a fellow sufferer. Hosea verbally connects Mrs. Knowlton's sympathy for Lizzie to suffrage (and thus to the equal rights protestors), but unlike the women outside the courthouse who protest in the spirit of Lizzie's innocence, Mrs. Knowlton acknowledges Lizzie's probable guilt but defends her nonetheless. The essentialisation of difference implied by Mrs. Knowlton's identification with Lizzie aligns her with the collective politics of the second wave and its appeals for universal sisterhood. By representing its contemporaneous contexts in a historical guise, the film creates an opportunity to comment upon the values of second-wave feminism as it understands them while situating that comment as if deriving from the events of the plot themselves.

Although the film gives voice to the view of the murders as a response to shared oppression, however, it is careful to frame that view as if to undermine its subversive potential: Mrs. Knowlton's remarks demonstrate a significant lack of judgment in relation to the overall plot. We may laugh at the sexist Hosea in his

archaic dismissal of women's suffrage, but behind the joke, the irony remains that in attempting to prosecute Lizzie, the film suggests, he is transcending the gender notions of his time by making a case against a woman whom Victorian stereotypes held was incapable of murder. Karen Roggenkamp notes the extent to which the historical Lizzie's gender and social standing influenced the ways in which her case was understood in its time, such that her judgment by the public relied upon her perceived femininity in relation to popular types, such as the "true woman" and the "New Woman" (Roggenkamp 82-87). The film essentialises this nuance to trade upon the common twentieth-century assumption that the Victorian era was one of repression, thereby positioning contemporary viewers, in contrast, as liberated and self-aware. Mrs. Knowlton, the victim of what the film constructs as a generally repressive system, *misreads* Lizzie's motives as a response to the gender constraints she herself experiences. Viewers, in contrast, are placed in a position of superior understanding. As Prosecutor Knowlton suggests, Mrs. Knowlton is unaware of the real motives for the murders—we, as viewers, are not. Although Lizzie does voice feelings of domestic constraint and economic dependence at times, the significance of these moments is far outweighed by two more specific motives the film puts forward: greedy premeditation and incest-damaged entrancement. Conflicting in themselves, both of these motives are of the private, domestic realm, unique to Lizzie and thus unknown to Mrs. Knowlton. These motives emphasise Lizzie's difference and minimise the applicability of Mrs. Knowlton's sympathies, which neutralises the threat the notion of a fully-generalisable female murderer would present to the social order in its suggestion of a universal female capacity for violence.

On the one hand, Mrs. Knowlton's empathy for Lizzie strictly on the basis of their shared gender associates her with a notion of feminism broad or assimilative enough to incorporate Lizzie and to appeal to 1970s viewer identification. The film thus links the gender oppression experienced by women of the 1890s, which Mrs. Knowlton believes to have motivated the murders, to the constraints experienced by women of the 1970s. On the other hand, however, the film undermines this potential link by depicting Mrs. Knowlton as ill-informed in her understanding of the murders as a response to shared oppression. It also focuses on suffrage and rational dress, goals of first-wave feminism that have already been achieved, in order to downplay the threat of contemporary feminist agendas; women of the 1970s did not suffer from a lack of the specific freedoms Mrs. Knowlton suggests may have motivated Lizzie to kill, so they should have no need of drastic measures.

However, the comment upon feminism implied by the film's framing of its second-wave sentiments in relation to its plot exceeds the simple text/context relationship whereby such framing could fix or determine its meaning. The resultant tensions that emerge within *The Legend of Lizzie Borden's* relatively explicit engagements with feminism are reflected and amplified in its chaotic characterisation of Lizzie. The film creates ambiguity regarding Lizzie's self-control and self-awareness, which plays out in a conflicted, dualistic portrayal of her motives. On the one hand, Lizzie is portrayed as in control of her actions, self-aware, and pre-meditating, in keeping with liberal notions of agency and empowerment. In the context of this characterisation, to some extent Lizzie voices what the film posits as typical frustrations of a woman of her era. She is frustrated with her economic dependence upon her father and angry at her consequential constriction to an unfulfilling home environment. Upon overhearing a conversation in which her

stepmother Abby urges her father Andrew to change his will to diminish what Lizzie and her sister Emma will inherit upon his death, Lizzie suggests her threatening intentions to her sister Emma (“I’ll see her dead first”), clearly indicating premeditation. She also plans: she steals an axe for the purpose of the murders, encourages her sister Emma to get out of town, and tries to get Bridget the maid out of the house. Throughout the scenes associated with this interpretation, Lizzie appears to act rationally and deliberately. She appears self-controlled and calculating, even when expressing anger. This storyline suggests the possibility for a reading of the murders as a subversive response to Victorian gender constraints, a rebellion against oppression like that de Mille implies through her sympathetic portrayal of the Accused. However, the film is once again careful not to give too much credence to this potentially subversive reading. Lizzie’s frustration and demands are depicted as excessive and unreasonable, greedy and childish. Though Lizzie accuses Andrew of being a “skinflint,” for instance, Abby points out that she went on a “grand tour of Europe two summers ago.”⁸⁶ Abby is characterised brutally (an evil stepmother), but her claims nonetheless complicate sympathies for Lizzie as deprived of deserved freedoms. Lizzie’s self-awareness, though a sign of empowerment in a sense, becomes exaggerated into manipulative conniving, evoking stereotypes of female cunning. These scenes suggest that, as in her relationship to a gender-neutral trial, Lizzie only becomes “empowered” when guilty.

On the other hand, Lizzie is presented as traumatized by childhood incest and unconscious in her murderous impulses, acting out involuntarily the violence that

⁸⁶ See “Lizzie’s European Tour” (Appendix).

reflects her repressed desires. Just as in Freeman's "The Long Arm" a physically stigmatized lesbian monster stepped in to do what Sarah may have wanted all along, *The Legend of Lizzie Borden*'s unconscious, traumatized Lizzie steps in to fulfil Lizzie's (here, paradoxically premeditated) ambition. Whereas de Mille's *Fall River Legend* appeals to the universal connotations of its psychoanalytic themes, in *The Legend of Lizzie Borden*, a psychoanalytic focus serves to individualize Lizzie, emphasising her difference. Consider, for example, a pathetic scene during Lizzie's pre-trial imprisonment during which the following takes place between Lizzie and her sister Emma:

Lizzie: Why do they speak so cruelly of me, Em?

Emma: Who?

Lizzie: District attorney Knowlton. "The sphinx of coldness." Why do they want to hurt me like that?

Emma: [welling up with tears] I don't think they mean to, it's just that you're...special...and special people have always been misunderstood, you know that.

Lizzie: Oh, Em, I don't want to be special. [crying on her shoulder while Emma rubs her back]

Lizzie looks completely sincere (in contrast to other moments in the film where her manner seems affected or put-on), and sobs as Emma sings "Lullaby and Goodnight," as if to an infant. Use of the word "special" here may be intended to evoke "special needs" (this meaning was in popular use by 1975), perhaps suggesting that Lizzie suffers from a mental disability. It might also refer to the "unfeminine" emotional reserve to which the phrase "sphinx of coldness" refers, and create a sort of knowing viewer sympathy for Lizzie as an "uncharacteristic" Victorian female.⁸⁷ The word "special" itself also links this infantilizing,

⁸⁷ As Martha Vicinus notes in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, women of Lizzie's time were "trained to be loving and emotional" (xi). The film depicts Lizzie's questionably "natural" stoicism as possibly contributing to her dissatisfaction with (or inability to abide by) gendered societal expectations—dissatisfaction the film sometimes suggests motivated the murders. On the historical Lizzie's emotional demeanour, see Appendix.

individualizing moment to the film's ongoing theme of paternal incest. In an earlier scene developing the rational, financial motive for the murders, in which Lizzie is ranting about her father's miserliness, he puts both hands on her cheeks and says, "I don't understand you, girl. You and I were always so close. Specially close." She pulls his hands from her cheeks, and says dryly, "Yes, father, specially." The repetition of "special" in the prison with Emma suggests that the source of Lizzie's difference relates to the "special" (incestuous) bond she had with her father.

The incestuous connotations of Lizzie's relationship with Andrew are linked to a bizarre marriage-like ceremony. In one scene, a young child Lizzie slips a ring onto her father's little finger⁸⁸ and kisses him on the lips. Right before the murders, the adult Lizzie stands at a window in a white dress surrounded by a gently undulating lace curtain. A few scenes later, she bends down and leans over her sitting father's shoulder to give him an almost upside-down kiss on the mouth. The night after the murders, Lizzie bends over her father's coffin and gives him a third and final kiss. Together these scenes suggest a symbolic reading: the scene with the ring evokes a marital engagement, the curtain a wedding veil. The inverted kiss suggests a power reversal and positions the murders as the warped consummation of a lifelong incestuous and initially paedophilic relationship. The kiss Lizzie gives her dead father in his coffin that evening becomes the symbol of their twisted wedding night.⁸⁹

The coffin kiss relates to the film's suggestion of Andrew's necrophilia, by which his relationship with Lizzie is still further complicated and individualised. In

⁸⁸ The historical Andrew Borden did indeed wear a ring on his finger that was a gift from a young Lizzie. See "Andrew's Ring" (Appendix).

⁸⁹ The trauma Lizzie undergoes in the absence of a mother figure (and her subsequent violence) may constitute a conservative response to second-wave feminism's critique of the power structures within the traditional family unit. (The film offers a cautionary depiction of what can happen when women "neglect" their responsibilities as mothers.)

one scene, Lizzie witnesses her father, then an undertaker, touching a body under a sheet. Later, he tries to get Lizzie to touch the body, and in recoiling she disconnects a tube of blood or embalming fluid by which she is dramatically bespattered. Both here and in the scene depicting Lizzie's coffin kiss, the incest to which the film alludes but that it never explicitly depicts is thus displaced onto scenes of necrophilia. Throughout the scenes associated with this trauma motive, Lizzie appears entranced, as she almost sleep-walks through events.⁹⁰ Her vacant movements seem involuntary or insane. Some shots present Lizzie's point of view (an aerial view of Andrew on the sofa before the fall of the axe, for instance), but many are shot at crooked angles or presented in slow motion, and images are often shown in or alongside their distorted reflections: Lizzie's face in the head of the axe, Abby's murder in a curved mirror high on the wall, Lizzie's retreat from the sitting room in the swinging pendulum of a grandfather clock. The result is a disorienting, dream-like effect, simultaneously inviting and problematizing viewer identification with the violent subject.⁹¹ The film also connects a suggestion of supernatural compulsion to this motive. When Lizzie rises vacantly from her bed as if drawn by unseen forces to go kiss her father in his coffin, it is exactly as the clock strikes 11 p.m., the night-time counterpart to the hour in which the murders were committed (11 a.m.). By creating this temporal parallel, the film positions the incest/necrophilia storyline as the dark, furtive counterpart to the rational, financial motive: Lizzie's private, individualised version of what might otherwise be interpreted as a public

⁹⁰ Lizzie's seemingly involuntary animation and Andrew's implied violation of the boundary between life and death in his molestation of the corpse may loosely evoke the zombie genre popularised by *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968. For a discussion of the film's enormous influence and an outline of some conventions of the genre, see 'The Themes of the Current Zombie Movie Genre' in Paffenroth *Gospel of the Living Dead: George Romero's Visions of Hell on Earth*.

⁹¹ The killer's point of view is often presented in horror films of the slasher era, which was firmly established by *Halloween* in 1978 (Hutchings 195). Its complex implications for viewer identification are addressed in Clover.

problem. This Lizzie is damaged and unconscious, at times infantilised, and the film associates the traumatised repetition she seems to be enacting as outside her control. The film presents this unconscious, traumatised version of Lizzie as—like the greedy and childish but self-aware Lizzie—irreconcilable with the universal, second-wave-like feminism suggested by Mrs. Knowlton, who is ignorant of the individual difference rendered hyperbolic through this characterisation. The film thus effectively suggests that neither version of Lizzie can be accounted for within its construction of feminism.

The individualisation of both the self-aware Lizzie (through her unreasonable greed and childishness) and the traumatised Lizzie (through psychological internalisation and the outrageous exaggeration of her difference) is problematic in that it reflects the aforementioned tendency of popular television to “manage and contain” the political implications of its engagement with feminism (Douglas 203). Dow links the individualisation and internalisation of women’s problems in 1970s American sitcoms to the de-radicalisation of feminism in this period. Like these sitcoms, *The Legend of Lizzie Borden* may individualise Lizzie’s problems to disavow contemporaneous calls for sisterhood, and the film’s internalisation of those problems may anticipate the “therapeutic,” “self-help” solutions Dow identifies in the popular media in the mid to late 1970s and 1980s as alternatives to the structural transformation of patriarchal society advocated by the more radical strands of the early women’s liberation movement (Dow 59-85).

However, the impossible simultaneity of the two main motives and characterisations the film proposes is revealing in the confusion it generates. Logically, they should be mutually exclusive, but *The Legend of Lizzie Borden* combines them. Its convoluted storyline juxtaposes the intrinsically contradictory

presentation of a generalisable, identifiable Lizzie responding to a universalisable experience of patriarchy with an adamantly individualised, internalised Lizzie experiencing an emphatically unique form of trauma. Despite the self-evident text/context relationship the film implies (and the control over that relationship it feigns to wield), the variegated *reality* of that relationship as performatively defined is exposed in the incongruity of the film's representations of motive and characterisations of Lizzie. The tension between collective and individual politics underlying the conflicting motives and characterisations the film presents may well have struck a chord with 1970s viewers, "millions" of whom "struggled with the tensions between embracing sisterhood and clinging to that bulwark of American ideology, democratic individualism" (Douglas 224-225). The manifestation of that tension as a lack of plot coherence and internal realism undermines the effectiveness of individualisation and internalisation as political damage-control strategies, ultimately accentuating the status of both *The Legend of Lizzie Borden* (as reflective of mainstream television) and feminism as "discourse[s] in crisis" (Morrissey 2).

The Legend of Lizzie Borden's conflicted characterisation of Lizzie and her motives reflects the deconstructive impact of female violence on narrative and culture. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the study of female violence comprises an ever-growing critical field yielding rich and wide-ranging research, from Jones' seminal *Women Who Kill* (re-released by the Feminist Press in October 2009) to more recent research focusing specifically upon of female violence in representation, such as Lynda Hart's *Fatal Women*, Helen Birch's *Moving Targets*, Belinda Morrissey's *When Women Kill*, or Hilary Neroni's *The Violent Women*. Such work explores the way in which female violence stretches narrative (and feminist) discourse(s), challenging and drawing attention to the often problematic

ways in which meaning is constructed. Some critics note the subversive potential of the failures of discourse to explain or excuse female violence: narrative breakdowns expose the ideas, preconceptions, emotions, stereotypes, and biases by which our understandings of female violence are shaped. Hilary Neroni, for instance, acknowledges this premise: “[A] film can use the violent woman to conceal antagonism by offering narrative explanations for this violence [...] but at the same time, the extraordinary lengths to which the narrative must go to explain or situate the violent woman reveals the trauma caused by her violence” (11). Similarly, in her critique of the representation of women murderers within news and legal discourses, Belinda Morrissey notes, “[T]he mainstream media and legal discourses’ attempts to narrate, understand and resolve events such as murders performed by women only make evident the impossibility of the coherent and seamless account of reality for which they strive” (2-3). It is this very breaking down of a “coherent and seamless” narrative that occurs in *The Legend of Lizzie Borden*: its attempts to individualise and internalise the oppression it depicts as motivating and characterising Lizzie are “desperate measures” to undermine the radical implications of depicting violence as motivated by oppression. That Lizzie’s father is not only a stereotypical Victorian patriarch, a possible paedophile and incest perpetrator, but also a necrophiliac, *and* incorporates his daughter into his weird sexual dead body antics, *and* kills her pet pigeons,⁹² and so forth creates an absurd proliferation of explanatory storylines. Furthermore, in presenting the individualised and internalised Lizzie in the context of an inherently contradictory version of feminism (a very widely inclusive and universally accessible version), the film creates a mixed-up, absurdly

⁹² See “Pigeons” (Appendix).

overdetermined character and a highly convoluted plot. In its thereby exposed “desperation,” it emphasises the power of the very forces it seeks to contain.

That the contradiction presented by the film’s proposed motives/characterisations is embodied directly in the moment of the murders affirms its connection to the challenge that female violence presents to modes of representation. Lizzie removes her clothing to commit the murders, for example, which—as well as troublingly eroticizing Lizzie’s violence—can be interpreted both as a symbolic gesture in relation to the positioning of the murders within the incest storyline as some kind of warped sexual consummation *and* as practical consideration (ease of clean-up) reflecting rational premeditation. During the depiction of the actual murders, between images of Lizzie actually wielding the axe are interspersed flashback images related to both the film’s suggestion of incest (including a disturbing slow-motion shot of a young Lizzie bouncing gleefully upon her father’s knee) and to the practical motive (a shot of stepmother Abbey during the overheard heated argument over Andrew’s will). While *The Legend of Lizzie Borden*’s response to its feminist contexts crucially shapes its adaptation of the Lizzie Borden story, the linking of its conflicting motives in the representation of Lizzie’s gendered violence—like the film’s dense and contradictory symbolism—affirms the inability of the text/context relationship to determine in advance the outcome of *Legend*’s engagement with cultural contexts. As a result, Lizzie becomes a placeholder for conflicting values: she is variously identifiable, relatable, and sympathetic while simultaneously utterly unique, incontrovertibly Other, a madwoman, a fiend, a one-off. In order to reflect these contradictory traits, her personality becomes so variable as to be almost a misnomer. She is rational and irrational, in control and out of control, active murderer and passive victim. This

overdetermination of Lizzie's character, as well as the film's overdetermination of motives and plotlines reflects ambivalence about feminism, especially in its perceived relation to female violence, as well as deep anxieties about women's agency and empowerment. The version of Lizzie the film presents is one whose motives are both universal among women and uniquely hers, whose power is intrinsically linked to her guilt and whose simultaneous innocence derives from helplessness. To the extent that the film gives voice to the interpretation of the murders as a response to shared oppression, through Mrs. Knowlton, for example, equally it disconnects its contemporary audience from that oppression through the adamant individualisation of Lizzie and the exaggeration of her difference.

While evoking both first- and second-wave feminist contexts, the film thus seeks to displace the bearing of second-wave feminism upon the issues of violence and oppression depicted in the film. The Lizzie of American 1970s primetime stands in to illustrate what the film constructs as liberal feminism's inadequacy to the task of giving meaning to female violence, which it posits as an illustration of its generally limited scope and utility. Ultimately, though, the relationship between the text and its cultural contexts is less clearly defined than the film attempts to suggest. Its evocation of its feminist contexts is selective and (re)constitutive, a performative process that constructs the links it presents as self-evident, implicit even as they become so contradictory as to become self-cancelling. The convolution of *The Legend of Lizzie Borden's* storyline, its far-fetched proliferation of motives, and its self-contradictory characterisation of Lizzie draw attention to this process, emphasizing rather than concealing the powerful anxieties about gender and feminism to which the film responds.

Chapter Four: The Limited Performativity of Angela Carter's "The Fall River Axe Murders"

Entering the 1980s, where can Lizzie go from incest, necrophilia, paedophilia, dead pigeons, economic deprivation, supernatural compulsion, etc., etc., etc.? Why, where else, but *more* incest, necrophilia, paedophilia, dead pigeons, economic deprivation, supernatural compulsion, etc. etc. etc., of course! "The Fall Rive Axe Murders," by canonical postmodern British fiction-writer Angela Carter, takes the overdetermined status of the Lizzie Borden construct as its starting point, exploring the issues of freedom and constraint, repetition and innovation, at the heart of the Lizzie Borden versioning phenomenon.⁹³

Carter's fiction has been the subject of prolific feminist celebration and critique. Much of the discussion has focused upon her collection of "fairy tales," *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), more or less explicitly in the context of her contemporaneous polemical piece on pornography, *The Sadeian Woman*.⁹⁴ Although Carter's treatment of Lizzie represents a departure from her adventures in fairy tale, many of the same feminist, narrative, and cultural concerns are at stake in "The Fall River Axe Murders" as in *The Bloody Chamber*, so it is helpful to provide an

⁹³ Carter had hoped to write a novel about the murders, but it was never produced (Gamble 159, Langlois 206, Clapp x). "The Fall River Axe Murder" first appeared as "Mise-en-Scène for a Parricide" in *The London Review of Books*, and a version of "Lizzie's Tiger," Carter's second Lizzie Borden story, appeared in *Cosmopolitan* in 1991. (Among its "First Publications" information, *Burning Your Boats* lists the original date of publication as September 1981, an error repeated in the notes for Langlois's chapter in *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale*. The correct year of the *Cosmopolitan* publication is 1991. The broadcast of the story on Radio Three, which is also mentioned in *Burning Your Boats*, also occurred in 1991, on August 26.) "The Fall River Axe Murders" was later collected in *Black Venus* (1985) and in a slightly altered form in *Saints and Strangers*, the American version of the anthology. "Lizzie's Tiger" appeared in *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* (1993). For the purpose of this chapter, references will be to the versions collected in *Burning Your Boats* (2006 [1995]), in which both stories are collected. The exact textual history of the story has thus far been inadequately documented; an illuminating piece entitled "Excerpts From a Work in Progress Entitled 'The Fall River Axe Murders'" appeared in *Stand Magazine*, volume 24, issue 2, in 1981; see discussion later in this chapter for details.

⁹⁴ Lorna Sage famously describes 1979 as Carter's "annus mirabilis" (65, also quoted in Gamble 109).

overview of the key debates. In *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter “rewrote,” “revised,” “reinvented” or “re-envisioned” (the cause for scare quotes and terminological tentativeness will become clear below) traditional fairy tales from “Snow White” to “Bluebeard,” in a volume often considered her best—and certainly her most controversial. The content of Carter’s short stories in *The Bloody Chamber* is often darkly sexual and explicit, which resonates with *The Sadeian Woman*’s exploration of a darkly sexual figure: the Marquis de Sade, an eighteenth-century pornographer whose name provides the etymology of “sadism.” Carter provocatively used the problems Sade’s writing raises for her—of pornography, of the politics behind gendered experience, of sexual oppression, and so forth—as the starting point for her polemical project. However, her suggestion of the possibility for what she calls a “moral pornographer” (19) invited many critics to read *The Sadeian Woman* as a problematic defence of Sade. The relationship between *The Sadeian Woman* and *The Bloody Chamber* has always been hotly contested, in terms that often relate to the perceived performativity of the two texts. Was the fiction intended to enact what the polemic purported to describe? Was Carter positing herself as a moral pornographer? (Could there really be such a thing?) How could Carter’s feminism and fiction be reconciled with contemporaneous debates surrounding pornography and representations of women more broadly, in a context of postmodern identity politics and theories of subjectivity?

Readers of Carter’s work came down on these and other questions in stark opposition to one another, as (meta-)critics have widely noted. To provide just a couple of examples, upon Carter’s death, Merja Makinen argued that, “With the death of Angela Carter we have lost an important feminist writer who was able to critique phallogentrism with ironic gusto and to develop a wider and more complex

representation of femininity” (14). In dramatic contrast, Patricia Duncker writes of *The Bloody Chamber*,

Carter is rewriting the tales within the strait-jacket of their original structures. The characters she re-creates must to some extent, continue to be abstractions. Identity continues to be confined by role, so that shifting the perspective [...] of the tales, merely explains, amplifies, and reproduces, rather than alters, the original, deeply, rigidly sexist psychology of the erotic. (227)

As these disparate perspectives exemplify, the performativity of Carter’s fiction (and feminism) was in many ways the crux of debates as to the political significance of her texts.

Stephen Benson offers an apt summary of the debates represented in the quotes by Makinen and Duncker, above, in a way that lends itself to analysis in performative terms:

[T]he debate was, and to an extent still is, a test case for a conception of feminism and feminist culture production, and, given that fairy tales underwent a concerted feminist critique in the 1970s, the parallels are self-evident: can fairy tales as, traditionally, miniature carriers of a conservative ideology of gender be appropriated to critique, and imagine alternatives to, traditional conceptions of gender and its construction, given the history of their role in the installation of these very traditions? (Benson “Angela Carter and the Literary Märchen” 37)

Given the focus of these debates upon “traditional conceptions of gender and its construction,” especially in relation to the cultural function of literature (and correlated concerns of the late 1980s surrounding the possibility of generating a feminine aesthetic), it is unsurprising that Butler’s *Gender Trouble* was seized upon by feminist critics as a useful way of theorizing Carter’s complex and often troubling representations of women.

That a concept of “gender as performance” (as Bristow and Broughton put it) is useful in understanding Carter’s representations of women has been widely noted.

It is almost impossible to read Carter's novels and short stories in the 1990s without noticing how uncannily they anticipate certain strands of current feminist theory, how importunately they seem to invite comparison with such influential work as that of Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler. The most insistent feature of current Carter studies, and one never far from the present collection, is her interest in that bundle of tropes—theatricality, spectacle and play-acting—now commonly associated with the theory and (cultural) politics of “gender as performance.” (Introduction 14)

Indeed, Carter's representations of women have very often been read in the context of Butler's performative concept of gender. Her use of surreal imagery and fantasy alongside her professed concern with the “material conditions” of real men and women's lives, her perceived historicization or specification of the universals she regarded as the stuff of fairy tales, her emphasis on theatrical themes and her exploitation of the carnivalesque all invite an interpretation in relation to the performative themes this thesis has explored, and many of these features have been explored performatively. Her characters Fevvers from *Nights at the Circus* and Tristessa from *The Passion of New Eve* are interpreted in this context with particular frequency.⁹⁵ Carter herself says, hinting at her concept of gender as performance, “In *The Passion of New Eve* the central character is a transvestite movie star, and I created this person in order to say some quite specific things about the cultural production of femininity” (Haffenden 85-86). Later in the same interview, which was published in 1985, John Haffenden put to Carter, delicately, “It is understandable, I suppose, that someone could approach the fantastic and exotic surface of your fictions and not be able to bridge the gap to the central point that your theatricality is meant to heighten real social attitudes and myths of femininity” (91). After *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, her critics had little trouble “bridging the gap” between her representations of women and her feminist views;

⁹⁵For an example of the latter, see Gamble 106.

performativity provided a highly workable framework for this purpose, and it was frequently embraced.

In fact, the link between Carter's fiction and a performative concept of gender was argued so pervasively that critics of the late 1990s came to treat it with some suspicion. Bristow and Broughton note that Carter's

early preoccupations many of them deeply unfashionable at their inception, are now acclaimed as "anticipating" postmodern feminists such as Judith Butler and Donna Haraway in a way it tests the resources of grammar to describe. What does this posthumous recognition, this after-the-fact "Butlerification" of Carter mean for literary history, for feminist historiography, and for Carter's own project? (19)

A performative theory of gender seems to apply uncannily to Carter's writing because the perspectives and ideologies her stories explore seem to respond to the conventional concepts of femininity (as essence) that postmodern feminists sought to deconstruct. It "tests the resources of grammar to describe" the relationship between Carter's texts and performative themes because in some respects the fiction seems to comment—not always positively—upon the Butlerian theory it predates chronologically. It negotiates themes of contingency and determinism, freedom and constraint, which became the focus of debates after *Gender Trouble*, in ways it was and is difficult to describe without recourse to the concept and indeed the language of performativity—a concept and a language to which Carter did not herself have recourse. One wishes to read Carter from a trans-temporal vantage, anachronistically, as pre-Butlerian, proto-Butlerian, Butlerian and post-Butlerian, all at once.⁹⁶ To say, merely, that Carter's representations of gender as performance

⁹⁶ Stephen Benson notes this simultaneous "prescience and datedness" critics identify in Carter's writing (Benson "Angela Carter and the Literary Märchen" 33).

“anticipate” performativity as theorized by Butler fails to do justice to the complexity of the engagement.

As the application of Butler to Carter came under scrutiny, many of the critiques to which the theory of performativity was subjected in the 1990s, described in the Introduction to this thesis (accusations of contingency or determinism, of offering a negative paradigm that only enabled critique, of eradicating the foundations necessary for identity politics), were also levelled at the school of Carter criticism that drew upon “gender as performance.” Although, as Jessica Tiffin notes, at least five of the essays in the 1997 Bristow and Broughton collection address performativity in some way (Tiffin 73), many of them call into question the spirit in which the theory might be applied to Carter and challenge the “triumphalist note that often creeps into feminist accounts of Carter’s late fiction, particularly those authorized by Butlerian performance theory” (Bristow and Broughton 15).⁹⁷ Bristow and Broughton and their contributors are wise to question the unproblematic application of “gender as performance” to Carter. As this thesis has demonstrated, performativity entails the accommodation of paradox, and thus serves best as a deconstructive tool, as a basis for questioning rather than as a solution. Furthermore, many of the applications (and critiques) of performance-inspired Carter criticism are primarily relevant to the identity-politics debates of the 1980s and 1990s, specifically. Indeed, it is telling that despite the obvious prevalence of performative approaches to gender in Carter in 1990s criticism (as reflected in the Bristow and Broughton collection), the term is not even indexed in Stephen Benson’s compelling and authoritative 2008 essay collection *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale*, which opens with a chapter by Sarah Gamble on Angela Carter. To the extent that

⁹⁷ See also Trevenna “Gender as Performance: Questioning the ‘Butlerification’ of Angela Carter.”

performativity (as “gender as performance”) in Carter studies has been deployed almost exclusively in the context of identity politics—and especially to the extent it has been deployed in its more psychoanalytically influenced guises—I would agree that its utility has perhaps been exhausted (or even exaggerated). However, Benson aptly notes a shift in recent Carter studies, toward contextualization and away from generalism: “If the second wave of Carter criticism is to have a defining set of concerns,” he proposes, “one such may transpire to be a more nuanced attention to style and a less demanding, less monologic search for ideological solutions, the latter having been the cause of too much critical approbation *and* denunciation” (9). The nuanced attention to style and the abandonment of the search for ideological solutions Benson anticipates here provide a sound basis for approaching Carter’s Lizzie Borden stories.

Putting Carter’s arguable espousal of “gender as performance” momentarily aside, I would like to consider to what extent Carter’s Lizzie Borden stories reflect a performative concept of the relationship between narrative and culture, which I will argue has implications for the feminist import of Carter’s stories.⁹⁸ I have used “gender as performance” and “performativity” rather interchangeably thus far in this chapter, but as I have argued throughout this thesis, performativity in its contemporary incarnations accounts for a far more complex intersection of concerns than any narrow concept that might be described simply as “gender as performance.” Concerns raised in earlier debates about Carter’s fiction regarding the role of literature in the conveyance of conservative and/or progressive ideologies may be

⁹⁸ Cristina Bacchilega has considered the structural resonances of Carter’s stories with traditional fairy tales in relation to the folklorist concepts of “tradition” and “performance” (Bacchilega).

expanded to enable a consideration of the complex relationship between texts and contexts more broadly.

Carter's concept of fiction, as expounded in interviews and enacted in her writing, derives from the conventional, hierarchical understanding of story and discourse, and more specifically from the concept of narrative discourse as a process of selection and ordering elements from among a hypostasized array of potentially narrativizable material—material Carter explicitly associates with the Freudian unconscious. Carter admits she was interested in the “psychoanalytic content of the stories” (83), and when asked, “In rewriting...fairy tales for *The Bloody Chamber* was it a deliberate part of your task to bring them out of the area of the unconscious?,” she answers in the affirmative, explaining that her aim was “to extract the latent content from the traditional stories and to use it as the beginnings of new stories” (Haffenden 84). In Carter's understanding of her revisitation of traditional fairy tales as the activation of their “latent” content, Carter presents her concept of (re-)writing as a form of symptomatic reading. (In a related comment, Carter remarks of her own writing, “[My] fiction is very often a kind of literary criticism, which is something I've started to worry about quite a lot” [Haffenden 83].) As a result, despite its active engagement with feminist concerns and the self-consciousness of its postmodern questioning of narrative, her fiction suffers at times from the very limitations of a psychoanalytically-informed, symptomatic approach to literature on which this thesis has focused. Indeed, even at her most self-conscious, most exaggerated, and most parodic, her limited concept not (or not just) of gender but of the cultural function of narrative keeps her from fully exploiting the potential of her engagement with fairy tales, folklore, or history (as in the case of the Lizzie Borden stories, which I will explore below).

That Carter is aware of and unhappy with the potentially problematic implications of her symptomatic concept of fairy-tale rewriting is reflected in her discomfort with the application of the word “versions” to her fairy tales: “It was not my intention to do versions,” she insists—though one wonders upon what definition of “version” Carter might have based this objection. The first definition *The Oxford English Dictionary* offers of the word “version” is, “a particular form of something differing in certain respects from an earlier form or other forms of the same type of thing,” which certainly appears diverse (indeed, convoluted) enough to encompass what Carter regards as the object of her fairy tales and, indeed, to allow for a meaningfully transformative interpretation of the term.⁹⁹ So why the objection?

Carter’s rather odd remark, which is often quoted but rarely analyzed, alludes to what I feel is a misguided and artificial distinction reflective of an inconsistency inherent to her conceptualization of the relationship between narrative and culture. The inconsistency is this: the performative aspects of Carter’s concept of gender (and of narrative texts in cultural contexts) are at odds with the psychoanalytic framework through which she seeks to understand them and to express them in her fiction. Carter did not benefit from the concept of the citation of an originless copy, from the deconstruction of the relationship between action and essence theorized by Butler. Carter does not want to think of the fairy tales (nor, most likely, her treatment of historical figures like Lizzie) as “versions” because, for her, every version entails a reversion and thus (given her psychoanalytic framework) every expression a repression and, inevitably, an uncanny return. For Carter, therefore, as for many of her critics, the implied referentiality of a version to its original (the however-self-

⁹⁹In fact, the dictionary’s third definition of “version,” relating to the medical field, provides a wonderful concept of versioning on which to draw: “the manual turning of a foetus in the womb to make delivery easier.” What a beautiful metaphor for the way in which a pre-existent (here, in the literal sense, not yet existing, pre-born) original may be “altered” to give birth to the new!

consciously constructed relation to “other forms of the same type of thing,” as the dictionary definition of a version puts it) is a bind.

The bind, as it now possible to describe, arises from the fact that when gender is presented as performed (and narrative interpreted) within a framework in which the process of writing is regarded as a process of symptomatic reading, of choosing elements from a hypostasized array of content that it is possible either to “activate” or to “leave latent,” that presentation (of gender as performed) is offered in a context ultimately characterised by its finitude. Every copy contains its latent original (sex behind gender, narrative as transcendent structure independent of any medium). This formulation results in a delimited space of signification, a “closed system,” because the sense in which possible “performances” are *constrained* by their referentiality is given priority over the sense in which possibility is *enabled* by that same referentiality (rather than each of these paradoxical senses serving as a deconstructive lens upon the other, as in contemporary re-workings of performativity that do not rely upon psychoanalysis). In short, therefore, for Carter, determinism trumps contingency. (To this formulation, in large part, may be attributed the apparent essentialism and thematic and formal enclosure for which Carter’s fiction is often critiqued.¹⁰⁰) Fortunately, however, this is not the whole story. Contrary to Carter’s limiting view, as Freeman’s temporal drag (among other contemporary re-workings of Butlerian performativity) has shown us, the aspects of versions that revert to or reprise the original (those aspects that make it recognizable as, indeed, a version) can be as subversively disruptive as their innovations. Although, because of her psychoanalytic understanding of the cultural function of narrative, Carter’s

¹⁰⁰ Sarah Gamble identifies “enclosure” as the “dominant trope” of “The Fall River Axe Murders” (159).

writing does not take full advantage of the subversive potential of its performative referentiality, there are nonetheless ways in which her writing hints at the inconsistency between, on the one hand, writing and gender as performative and, on the other hand, the psychoanalytic concept of writing as the activation of latent content.

In other words, Carter's closed-system understanding of her own writing does not entirely determine the status of the relationship between narrative and culture in her fiction. Tellingly, Carter contradicts herself frequently in regard to her view of her fairy tales as the activation of the repressed content of the traditional ones. At one point, for example, she remarks, "[Historian Robert Darnton] says you can hardly talk about the latent content of stories which are explicitly about cannibalism, incest, bestiality, and infanticide, and of course he's right" (Haffenden 83). Her wavering confidence in (or underdeveloped concept of) the psychoanalytic/symptomatic function of her writing (and its correlated political implications) is borne out in Carter's Lizzie Borden stories. Several critics have argued that Carter wavers at times in her adherence to a performative model of gender and, acknowledging the other side of the same coin, that a performative theory of gender does not fully account for the cultural function of her representations of women or of gender relations.¹⁰¹ Similarly, Carter fails to fully embrace a performative concept of the cultural function of narrative more broadly. Just as at times there remains an essentialised concept of sex behind her performative concept of gender, likewise there remains behind her understanding of the performative status of narrative and of culture a persistent belief in a psychoanalytically informed concept of narrative as a structure independent of any

¹⁰¹ See, for instance, Tiffin 75.

medium. However, ultimately, her negotiation of performative and psychoanalytic concepts of gender and of the cultural function of narrative result in a complex text that defies straightforward celebration or critique.

In “The Fall River Axe Murders,” Carter emphasises the conventional functions of narrative discourse as defined by Seymour Chatman, selection and ordering, as she perceives them, exploring the performative paradox of the simultaneously contingent and determined status of narrative/cultural meaning. Parodying the extent to which versions of the story like *Legend* tend to (over)emphasise contextual factors as exonerative/motivating (through exaggeration, multi-perspectivalism, heteroglossia, and other postmodern narrative strategies), Carter offers a “hilarious[ly] hyperbol[ic]” (Berni 50) account of the morning of the murders that fruitfully implicates its readers in the production of the Lizzie Borden construct, emphasizing the performative role of the interpreter in the fixing of narrative/cultural meaning by drawing attention to the mechanisms whereby it engages in suspense and disappointment, inclusion and exclusion, involvement and detachment. By drawing ironically upon nursery rhyme elements and techniques, Carter demonstrates the extent to which interpretations are shaped by the power of such reductive narratives. “The Fall River Axe Murders” engages with the performative paradox of narrative/cultural meaning (the paradox that interpretations are both enabled and constrained by the cultural circumstances whence they emerge) to suggest that both over-determining proliferative contingency and pre-determining narrative reductiveness both always already consign Lizzie to the problematic status of legend. The story thus delimits (by representing as delimited) the possibility for female agency. Carter represents “repetition with a difference,” but both the familiar and the new, in their respective subversive potential, are framed within the closed

system described above, the psychoanalytic model in which narrative and cultural meaning are ultimately fixed. For Carter, stuck in a psychoanalytic model that traps her as she traps her protagonists, every expression represses its imagined alternative. Within this formulation, all paths for Lizzie (whether expressed or repressed by a particular version, including—Carter suggests—her own postmodern reworking) lead to murder, “monstrosity,” and thus to legend. Every possible version participates in the problematic relegation to legend of the pseudo-historical figure who—as a consequence of the story’s psychoanalytic underpinnings—remains its problematically implied (albeit composite or fragmentary) referent.

The “Fall River Axe Murders” may be understood to comment critically upon the way in which versions position themselves in relation to the Lizzie Borden legend. In *The Legend of Lizzie Borden* TV-movie’s final moments, a gleeful Lizzie returns from the courthouse after her acquittal to a nervous Emma. “Lizzie,” Emma asks with urgency, facing away from her sister. “I’m only going to ask you this once more and then I shall never mention it again as long as I live.” She turns, dramatically. The clock over her shoulder ticks loudly, the only sound, as its pendulum swings. “Did you kill Father?” Lizzie, who has her back to Emma and viewers, finishes removing her coat, unhurriedly, then rotates slowly, almost mechanically (barely rotating her neck), as if entranced. The folk theme introduced at the beginning of the film begins to play, and the camera begins a very slow revolution around her, taking in her surroundings: a grandfather clock, a wall-clock, a piano, Emma. Lizzie remains completely static, wide-eyed. A printed epilogue appears on the screen: “Months after her acquittal Lizzie moved into a mansion in the fashionable section of Fall River, where she lived until she died on June 1, 1927 at the age of 66. Emma followed her to her own grave nine days later. To this day the

case remains unsolved.” As the camera approaches a full-circle, returning to a close-up of Lizzie’s face, the folk theme dissolves into the Lizzie Borden children’s rhyme, sung in a horrifying pitch by a group of children, ending the film. The movie thus leaves Lizzie firmly ensconced in a moment in time; she is frozen in folklore, to the tune of her own eerie theme song, and no camera angle reveals any clue to her mystery.

In a sense, it is this moment, this strange moment of contextually ensconced spacio-temporal stasis, of Lizzie’s conscription to the “woodcut-like simplicity” (Muller-Wood 277) of the nursery rhyme, that Carter takes up in “The Fall River Axe Murders,” which begins—as *Legend* ends—with a version of the rhyme:

Lizzie Borden with an axe
Gave her father forty whacks
When she saw what she had done
She gave her mother forty-one

Children’s rhyme

With her epigrammatic citation of the rhyme, Carter situates her tale not only in relation to Lizzie Borden as “quasi-folkloric” (Gamble 159) figure but in relation to the Lizzie Borden narrative archive itself. The incorporation of the children’s rhyme is a common feature of Lizzie Borden versions,¹⁰² so on the one hand this represents conformity with convention and calls upon the familiar formula for interpretation of the Lizzie Borden legend. It “activates” (to use Carter’s term) the narrative’s folkloric context. Rather than the best-known version of the rhyme (“Lizzie Borden took an axe”), though, Carter’s adopts the significantly less popular (though neither original nor unique) “with an axe” version of the rhyme. By doing so, she replaces the active verb in the first line with a passive preposition and thus delays the active

¹⁰² Langlois notes that “allusions to the rhyme abound in scholarly and popular book and article titles” (221).

“gave” until line two. Lizzie’s stereotypical passivity and problematically correlated victimhood/guilt are an important aspect of what’s at stake in Carter’s story, which dramatically delays the narration of the murders, so in a sense the first line provides a microcosm for the story as a whole. This presentation of a narrative microcosm anticipates the story’s use of a narrative zoom-effect to evoke (and parody) both “local and general” (Gamble 160) causes of the murders: the story presents an unmoving image, “Lizzie Borden with an Axe.” The fixity of this image is acknowledged in the narrative itself:

In all these clothes, out of sorts and nauseous as she was, in this dementing heat, her belly in a vice, she will heat up a flat-iron on a stove and press handkerchiefs with the heated iron until it is time for her to go down to the cellar woodpile to collect the hatchet with which our imagination—“Lizzie Borden with an axe”—always equips her, just as we always visualise St. Catherine rolling along her wheel, the emblem of her passion. (301)

“Mother” and “Father” are also swapped in Carter’s version of the poem from their marginally more popular ordering, shifting the chronology and corresponding narrative priority of the two murders, and also giving mother rather than father the extra whack.¹⁰³ Despite the real-life order in which the murders are believed to have been committed (Abby first), many initial and even some much later accounts of the story do not treat the murder of the step-mother as the primary objective of the murders. In fact, they often downplay the relationship between Lizzie and her step-mother (contrary to the evil step-mother allusions that would emerge later). (When Lizzie was charged with the murders, for example, a *New York Times* headline read, “Miss Borden Arrested; Charged With Murdering Her Father and His Wife.” Also recall, for instance, the elimination of the step-mother from

¹⁰³ Langlois notes Carter’s choice of a different version of the children’s rhyme from that with which Langlois herself was familiar in a footnote.

Freeman's version altogether.) The foregrounding of Andrew's murder may have resulted partly from the necessarily more public nature of Andrew's murder given his visibility in local business (and related separate spheres notions of gender), but it might also have been influenced by the priority of the father-daughter bond in Freudian constructions of identity formation—a priority other scholars have identified previously as a target of Carter's fiction. Most significantly for the aims of this chapter, by simultaneously evoking familiarity through the inclusion of the poem and rejecting the familiar by opting for a less popular formulation thereof, Carter presents a comment upon the performativity of Lizzie Borden versioning—the paradoxical repetition and difference, citation and reinvention by which performative concepts of narrative/cultural meaning are defined.

As I have begun to suggest, one of the ways in which Carter suggests the performative (and performed) status of the Lizzie Borden cultural construct is through the positioning of the story in self-consciously complex relation to other versions. The intertextuality of Carter's fiction in general¹⁰⁴ and of this story in particular¹⁰⁵ has been widely noted, but just as inadequate familiarity with the structures of fairy tales has sometimes led to inadequate understanding of the intertextuality of *The Bloody Chamber* (as Benson notes in "Angela Carter and the Literary Märchen" 34), likewise critics inadequately familiar with the Lizzie Borden archive have not adequately explored the precise nature of Carter's intertextual allusions in "The Fall River Axe Murders," overlooking or misreading key examples that occur on a narrative level.

¹⁰⁴ See Benson "Angela Carter and the Literary Märchen" 34 or Kaiser.

¹⁰⁵ See Langlois.

A complex referentiality is evoked, for example, in Carter's ironic description of the Borden house as "unpretentious" (quotation marks in original). Of Andrew Borden, the narrative explains, "But you would never think, to look at his house, that he is a successful and a prosperous man. His house is cramped, comfortless, small and mean—'unpretentious,' you might say, if you were his sycophant—while Second Street itself saw better days some time ago" (302). With "unpretentious," Carter chooses a word not from a single, specific prior version of the story (as the quotation marks might suggest to the uninformed reader), but a word that echoes *throughout* the Borden archive. The quotation might refer, for instance, to Porter's famous 1893 description ("an *unpretentious* two-and-a-half story *house*, the rooms of which were all connected" [6]); to the *American Law Review*, or the ironic quotation thereof in de Mille's 1965 *Lizzie Borden: A Dance of Death* ("a house kept, as the *American Law Review* phrased it, in 'the thrifty and *unpretentious* style characteristic of New England'"(121)), or yet to Sullivan's 1974 *Goodbye Lizzie Borden* (in which Andrew is described as "[u]npretentious in his tastes and in his habits" [17]), among others.

Similarly, Carter's choice of the word "christened" (which she does not place in quotation marks, challenging the specificity implied by her earlier quotation marks and calling into question her concept of citation) in discussing Lizzie's name evokes multiple other versions: "Christened" first appears in the context of Lizzie's name during the initial inquest itself (during which Lizzie confirms of her name, "I was so christened" [Kent and Flynn 52]), but it is among the most widely referenced words in the Lizzie Borden archive, quoted in Pearson *Trial* 395, Radin 18, de Mille 15, Sullivan 211, among likely numerous other sources with which Carter may have

been familiar (as well as in several versions that came after Carter's, including Hunter 28, Spiering 73, and others).

In other instances, the reference to a complex existing narrative oeuvre occurs on a narrative and a thematic level. For instance, though Carter does not acknowledge it specifically, the phrase "peculiar spells" is plucked directly from Victoria Lincoln's *A Private Disgrace* (1967), which is the origin of the theory that Lizzie may have committed the murders in an epileptic fit, but more or less "somnambulist" Lizzies appear frequently, evoked in the zombie-like wanderings of Elizabeth Montgomery in *The Legend of Lizzie Borden* and to some extent implied by the vaguely trancelike movements of de Mille's *Accused* as she takes up the axe at the ballet's climax. By choosing words, phrases, and themes that echo in various contexts across the archive, Carter emphasises the "repeated transmission" (Langlois 209) whereby Lizzie Borden is constructed, drawing attention to the role of the reader in determining Lizzie's cultural status. By emphasizing the commonalities between different versions (while simultaneously evoking their multiplicity), though, Carter implies a transcendent narrative, a Lizzie independent of her versioning.

This echo effect (and its problematic implications) is represented within the narrative form as various types of repetition that collectively both assert the contingency of narrative and frame that contingency as limited. Indeed, it could be argued that repetition is the defining feature of Carter's text. Consider, for instance, the phrase with which the story opens: "Early in the morning of the fourth of August, 1892, in Fall River, Massachusetts" (300). The abruptly cut-off sentence—like the disruption of the familiar version of the children's rhyme, above—jars the narrative flow (drawing attention to the readiness with which readers tend to settle into a narrative) and renders the proffered context the whole content of the sentence,

offering a metaphor for the all-determining role of context in the formulation of Lizzie Borden versions and providing yet another microcosm for the story itself. The opening lines also evoke the setting of a play, positioning the “telling” of the story (and its events) in relation to performance. Critics have often considered Carter’s interest in theatricality in relation to performative readings of her representation of gender (Britzolakis 43, for example). Here, the evocation of a theatrical setting indicates the performativity of the impending process (of writing/reading) whereby Lizzie Borden will be rendered.

As soon as the story has thus begun, it immediately self-interrupts and begins anew: “Hot, hot, hot...very early in the morning, before the factory whistle but, even at this hour, everything shimmers and quivers under the attack of white, furious sun already high in the still air” (300).¹⁰⁶ This line continues to emphasize the setting of the story in time and space, an exaggeration that enables its parody of the tendency of other versions, like *Legend*, to draw upon a proliferation of contextual factors in an exonerative or excusatory context. The narrative proceeds, accordingly, through an extended description of the heat of the morning, of the mills, and of the clothing worn by the people of Fall River generally and by Lizzie, Bridget, and Andrew, specifically. Then, the original phrase repeats, but slightly varied: “it is still early morning, before the factory whistle, the perfect stillness of hot weather...” (301). On the one hand, this repetition represents the contingency of narrative: by manipulating natural chronology and violating the coherence of the narrative, in keeping with postmodern style, it emphasizes the status of the text as process and asserts its capacity for playfulness. On the other hand, though, it frames that contingency in such a way as to limit its impact. By beginning anew after all the intervening, some

¹⁰⁶The heat is itself a theme that echoes across the archive. See “The Heat” (Appendix).

might say “historicizing,” description, the story suggests there has been no narrative progress; readers are positioned in the same moment in time, the same place, a technique that invites numerous interpretations. Firstly, the re-start of the narrative after a few paragraphs of characteristically acrobatic postmodern prose might symbolize that the desperate narrative labouring of Lizzie Borden version-ers in their continual retellings of the story always fails to contain (by fixing in narrative) the narrative/cultural trauma of female violence. Secondly, the recommencing interruption might also be interpreted a meta-comment on the aesthetic concerns of postmodern fiction as detached from the practical politics of agency, an accusation with which Carter was familiar,¹⁰⁷ by offering an illustration of the failure of postmodern narrative strategies to advance the position of the story’s heroine or its readers. Thirdly, the representation of fruitless (in terms of plot advancement) narrative activity might also provide a metaphor for Lizzie’s life, which Carter describes as full of pointless domestic tasks that while ephemerally occupying offer no promise of meaningful change for Lizzie’s future, no out from her determining personal/historical circumstances, her fixed spatio-temporal location. Like the use of repeated elements in the story more broadly, this example emphasizes the already determined status of the Lizzie Borden construct, despite the contingency of narrative selection paradoxically asserted through the text’s postmodern features (its self-interruption and use of hyperbole to undermine authoritative narration and to serve a parody of the overemphasis of earlier versions upon contextual factors as motivating).¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Haffenden, for instance, asks her, “I know that you find it fundamentally important to have an intelligent awareness of society, and yet the highly stylized and decorative apparatus of your novels might appear to be disengaged from the social and historical realities you want to illuminate” (85).

¹⁰⁸ For more on the postmodern features of the text, see Berni, Muller-Wood.

Far from a “refus[al] to create a hermetically sealed fictional world” (50), as Berni would have it, Carter’s use of repetition serves to reinforce the boundaries of the psychoanalytically framed narrative. The mutual use of anaphoric and antistrophic repetition particularly characterizes that narrative as closed system. In instances of anaphoric repetition, which are prevalent, the narrative offers a series of phrases that start the same but end differently. For example,

You would drench your handkerchief with cologne and press it to your nose. *You would* splash yourself with parma violet so that the reek of fleshly decay you always carried with you was overlaid by that of the embalming parlour. *You would* abhor the air you breathed. (301, my emphasis)

The use of the second person subjunctive creates a bizarre effect that simultaneously inspires identification and alienation. In the three sentences, Carter offers three different possible appeals to reader sympathy. By doing so, she demonstrates the extent to which, for her, from a writerly perspective, narrative is a process of choosing from among multiple prospective narrativizable elements. Ultimately, though, the three versions, however varied, achieve the same thing. They are all sensory appeals to reader identification (as a basis for ultimate exoneration for Lizzie’s crime). The sentences thus represent variations, yes, but various on a theme (just as Carter might suggest the versions may be understood to “reinvent” but nonetheless remain constrictively defined in relation to the illusory construct they create).

Repetition is also framed in a context of overriding determinism in the following example of anaphoric repetition, in which repetition evokes desperation:

She puts on dresses and then she takes them off. *She* looks at herself in her corset. *She* pats her hair. *She* measures herself with the tape-measure. *She* pulls the measure tight. *She* pats her hair. *She* tries on a hat, a little hat, a chic little straw toque. *She* punctures it with a hatpin. *She* pulls the veil down. *She* pulls it up. *She* takes the hat off.

She drives the hatpin into it with a strength she did not know she possessed. Time goes by and nothing happens.

She traces the outlines of her face [...] *she* isn't ready to be seen, yet.

She is a girl of Sargasso calm.

She used to keep her pigeons in the loft [...] *She* liked to feel the soft scratch of their beaks [...] *She* changed their water every day [...] (315-6, my emphasis)

Ultimately, like the rendering moot of narration in relation to plot advancement in the earlier example (“it is *still* early in the morning...”), these lines suggest that in the end, it does not matter (to the narrative) what Lizzie does. Her mundane and repetitive activity, like the aesthetic “activity” (the narrative “manipulations” characteristic of Carter’s postmodern style), has no impact on her situation. Whether she puts on dresses or takes them off, pats her hair (once or twice), or wears a hat, no matter which domestic task she chooses from among the devastatingly narrow selection available to her, she is still a spinster in her bedroom (“Time goes by and nothing happens”). The narrative reflects the limited possibilities available to Lizzie, the futility of her choice from among them (her activity), and thus the ironic condition of her agency.

The comment thus offered resonates with the problematic concept of freedom Carter expounds in *The Sadeian Woman*: “A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster. Her freedom will be a condition of personal privilege that deprives those on which she exercises it of her own freedom. The most extreme kind of this deprivation is murder. These women murder” (27). These lines certainly seem relevant to the Lizzie of “The Fall River Axe Murders,” which in a sense may be understood as an exploration of the ironic “freedom” available in a closed system in which—as in *The Legend of Lizzie Borden*—empowerment and guilt are problematically (and, Carter might suggest, inextricably) conflated. Langlois notes

critics would likely agree that “Carter plays with the dialectic between constraint and freedom for women in some complicated ways” (211). Complicated, maybe, but not impenetrable. To whatever extent Carter may be understood to “play with the dialectic between constraint and freedom,” ultimately that play is constrained by the story’s reference to a legend that a psychoanalytic model for narrative renders debilitating. Returning to the matter of repetition: the sentences quoted above start the same but end differently (thus “repetition with a difference,” in a sense), but they vary, once again, within an overriding context of oppression.

The story’s use of antistrophic repetition combines problematically with the anaphoric examples above. Antistrophically, Carter writes, “a sky already *white*, the shadowless light of new England like blows from the eye of god, and the sea, *white* and the river, *white*” (301, my emphasis). Sky, sea, river, all environmental elements, are blanketed—“white”—and thus rendered equal, essentialised beyond any differentiation, in their evocation here. Carter thus offers a comment on the extent to which the exaggerated implication of context in Lizzie Borden versions undermines the validity of any given strand, as Berni has observed, and similarly to what I argued in relation to *The Legend of Lizzie Borden*. More significantly, by using anaphoric and antistrophic repetition together in the story, Carter renders the contingency of narrative discourse (in the sense of choosing and (re-)ordering elements from among a selection of potentially narrativizable “latent” content) moot: this story reads the same way forwards and backwards, “upstairs and downstairs,” “inside and outside” (304).

Emphasizing this point on the level of phrases, Carter’s “repetitions with a difference,” both anaphoric and antistrophic, generally serve only to support, exaggerate or otherwise extend the meaning of the original phrase, despite their

variation, which is generally slight. Of Bridget's choice of dinner ("twice-cooked fish") given the weather, Miss Russell remarks: "In all *this heat, this dreadful heat!*" (311). The narrator later relays, "Miss Russell *knew* [my emphasis], she just *knew* [emphasis in original] this dark man was a figment of Lizzie's imagination" (312). "Oh, Lizzie," Russell reassures a few sentences later, "it is the dreadful summer, the *heat*, the *intolerable heat* that's put us all out of sorts, *makes us* fractious and nervous, *makes us* sick" (312). Just as in the opening lines of the story "early" quickly becomes "very early," In these examples, "heat" becomes "dreadful heat" and later "intolerable heat," "knowing" becomes "just *knowing*," and "fractious and nervous" are exaggerated to downright "sick." None of these variations has any significant impact upon the meaning of the sentence in which it appears, apart from exacerbating its effect. By framing her concept of narrative contingency in such a way, Carter undermines the subversive potential of "repetition with a difference" by positioning both "repetitions" and "differences" within the same, ultimately closed context in which they elicit no significant transformation of meaning on any level from sentence to plot.

Emblematization functions alongside repetition to demonstrate that the scope of narrative "selectivity" available to Lizzie Borden versioners is, for Carter, ultimately finite. As Laurie di Mauro suggests, "Carter strips her story down, in full view of the reader, to what she considers its bare *emblematic* bones" (196, emphasis added). Emblematization combines with the story's proliferating contexts to politically troubling ends: "The Fall River Axe Murders" represents the contingency of narrative as a choice from among increasingly essentialised "emblems," any of which can serve the reductive function for which it is "considered." Of Emma's absence from the house in contrast to Lizzie's presence, the narrator explains,

“Lizzie was invited away, too, to a summer house by the sea to join a merry band of girls but, *as if* on purpose to mortify her flesh, *as if* important business kept her in the exhausted town, *as if* a wicked fairy spelled her in Second Street, she did not go”

(302, my emphasis). Anja Muller-Wood argues of these lines:

Each half-sentence offers us a different take on Lizzie Borden: New England Saint, businesswoman or spellbound child. However, as the repeated “ifs” suggest, neither of the three images is “correct:” they are all fantasies imagined by the many Fall River amateur detectives trying to come to grips with that puzzle located in their midst. Indicating their painstaking travail, the many “ifs” also are metafictional signals reminding all too trusting readers that this text is an assemblage of subjective and hence unreliable positions. (284)

That may be so, but I question the significance of such a gesture. Ultimately, the narrative suggests, it does not matter which of these fantasies the writer/reader chooses (and we are hardly offered a varied selection!); for Carter, again, Lizzie always already takes the axe (“with which we always equip her” [Carter 301]). As Muller-Wood observes, the narrative suggests that neither of the three images is “correct,” indeed that the quest for a real or authentic concept of Lizzie and her motivations is futile, but it offers no alternative. It does not, for example, provide any suggestion as to how it might be possible to do justice to the Lizzie Borden figure in a context in which truth or authenticity are acknowledged as impossible.

That the “selection” of narrativizable elements available to versioners is not only finite but also limited in its actual impact is also reflected in instances in which Carter offers a list of emblems, any one of which could serve to trigger a given narrative effect. Describing the contents of the trans-archivally stereotyped Bridget, for example, the narrative offers:

A rosary of brown glass beads, a cardboard-backed colour print of the virgin bought from a Portuguese shop, a flyblown photograph of her solemn mother in Donegal—these lie or are propped on the

mantelpiece that, however sharp the Massachusetts winter, has never seen a lit stick. (303)

In these lines, Carter presents a series of images that characterize Bridget by her exaggerated piety (as reflected in its material artefacts), her Irish heritage, and her deprivation: iconic manifestations of the three attributes with which Bridget is most widely associated. Carter thus presents her reader with different options, all of which trigger the same stereotype, serve the same function: the stereotyping of Bridget. The repetition of iconic attributes amounts to an essentialisation because each emblem operates metonymically, example-as-essence, “representative” icon as substitute for nuanced characterization. The self-conscious mutual evocation of multiple emblems *draws attention* to their emblematic stereotyping function, but that function itself remains unchanged. The essentialisation of Bridget’s character is thus critiqued, but no alternative presented.

At one point, Carter explicitly acknowledges the boundaries of the cultural imagination suggested in earlier examples:

The girls stayed at home in their rooms, napping on their beds *or* repairing ripped hems *or* sewing loose buttons more securely *or* writing letters *or* contemplating acts of charity among the deserving poor *or* staring vacantly into space.

I can’t imagine what else they might do.

What the girls do when they are on their own is unimaginable to me. (304)

Once again, Carter offers a selection of narrative “options” from which a Lizzie Borden narrator (and/or reader) might choose: napping, repairing, sewing, writing, contemplating, staring. To some extent, the lines that follow suggest the repression of the subversive alternatives to Carter’s conventionally feminine list. As such, Carter might suggest, they invite the imagining of their alternatives. What else might the “girls” do on their own? Have sex? (The varied repetition of this line on the

following page—“What would the daughters of the rich do *with themselves* if the poor ceased to exist?”—extends the sexual implication in its masturbatory connotation, eroticizing the self-pleasure of charitable giving.) Plot a murder? By depicting the strategically (repressively) limited cultural imagination through which Lizzie Borden is filtered in successive versions, Carter shows that she is critical of the reduction of Lizzie to rhyme she simultaneously represents as inevitable (a consequence of her psychoanalytically informed, closed-system concept of narrative versioning).

As the story progresses, the narrative elements Carter offers becomes more and more emblemized:

A dresser with another distorting mirror; no mirror in this house does not take your face and twist it. On the dresser, a runner embroidered with forget-me-nots; on the runner, a bone comb missing three teeth and lightly threaded with grey hairs, a hairbrush backed with ebonised wood, and a number of lace mats underneath small china boxes holding safety-pins hairnets etc. (303-304)

By providing increasingly close-up but no less opaque emblems of Mrs. Borden's feminine surroundings, Carter suggests—as throughout—that no angle provide a glimpse of the “real” Lizzie, no narrative is authoritative. At the end of these lines, falling back upon “etc.,” the narrator cannot even be bothered to offer a wider selection of the stock images it implies are at its disposal; he/she leaves readers to fill in the blanks with the usual paraphernalia. You know the drill, the story suggests.

Eventually, the emblems are reduced to single words (“Bureau; dressing-table; closet; bed; sofa” [313]) until then at last they are just visual images, icons: The narrative describes the way in which Lizzie's recollections of her trip to Europe are like a slideshow: “The Tower of London; click. Notre Dame; click. The Sistine Chapel; click. Then the lights go out and she is in the dark again” (313). As Rikki

Ducornet observes, Lizzie herself is reduced by the reductive images through which her surroundings are conveyed: “Like Saint Catherine, Lizzie is emblematic and exemplary; she is reduced to sign—the axe she carries within her grinding madly” (91). Carter is self-conscious about this process of reduction, of whittling down. In a much-quoted metafictional moment, the narrator remarks of Uncle Morse,

The other old man is some kind of kin of Borden’s. He doesn’t belong here; he is visiting, passing through, he is a chance bystander, he is irrelevant.

Write him out of the script.

Even though the presence in the doomed house is historically unimpeachable, the colouring of this domestic apocalypse must be crude and the design profoundly simplified for the maximum emblematic effect.

Write John Vinnicum Morse out of the script.

One old man and two of his women sleep in the house on Second Street. (302, emphasis in original)

Here, as elsewhere, Carter offers pointless variations on the same sentence (“He doesn’t belong here, he is visiting, passing through, he is a chance bystander,”) culminating in the overriding narrative outcome: “he is irrelevant.” “Write him out of the script,” she urges readers, and—summarizing the point of the whole story—“the colouring of this domestic apocalypse must be crude and the design profoundly simplified for the maximum emblematic effect” (302). The imperative tense invites the challenge of narrative authority: who are you to tell me what is or isn’t relevant, readers might rightly ask? Repeating the line about Morse with a difference, historicized in greater detail (“Write John Vinnicum Morse out of the script”) after her metatextual comment provides another demonstration of the extent to which Carter suggests that even her own, distinctly postmodern, “historicized,” self-conscious rendering fails to make an impact on the inevitable reduction of Lizzie to rhyme. Overall, then, and explicitly despite postmodern prose strategies, Carter suggests, the rhyme—the most basic narrative script—determines all.

The representation of the reduction of Lizzie to rhyme as inevitable is at odds with the ways in which the narrative draws attention to the performativity of the reading process (associated with the story's critique of reductive emblemization qua essentialism). It has been suggested by some critics that one function of these narrative interruptions (and, I would argue, of representations of delimited narrative contingency) is to draw attention to the (performative) role of the writer/reader in the construction of the Lizzie legend. Berni argues, "[Carter's] story is not so much a re-telling of the Borden murders as a commentary on past re-tellings. Carter refuses to create a sealed-off fictional world; instead, she repeatedly reminds us of her role as producer of the past" (Berni 31). Similarly, Muller Wood argues,

Precisely because the events on the day of the murders will never be known, the author can draw our attention to the representation of the case. [Carter] can redirect her focus from the potential perpetrator to those who comment on her (including the readers of the story), illuminating their interpretive strategies and the moral desires that inform them. While apparently attending to her favourite protagonist, Carter's Lizzie Borden stories in effect reveal what makes the reader tick. (277-278)

That Carter's narrative strategies comment upon "what makes" readers "tick" (a pun on the stuttering ticking sounds that provides the aural backdrop to Carter's story) is certain. In the remainder of this chapter, I will uncover some previously overlooked ways in which *what* Carter suggests makes us all tick is—overwhelmingly—the compelling simplicity of the nursery rhyme. I will consider the narrative features, re-starts, interruptions, stutters and otherwise-described hiccups, more generally, in more direct relation to the nursery rhyme, specifically, using an exploration of the story's intertextual resonances with nursery rhymes to consider those aspects of Carter's story that reflect her understanding of gender and writing in performative terms.

“The Fall River Axe Murders” begins, as I have discussed previously, with a version of the Lizzie Borden nursery rhyme. Sarah Gamble imagines the epigram as a contrast from the text itself, remarking,

Carter prefaces the narrative with the familiar nursery rhyme in which Lizzie gives her father “forty whacks,” [—note that even Gamble reduces both parents to “father” here, perhaps as a prerequisite of the psychoanalytic interpretation she is about to offer], thus drawing attention to Borden’s quasi-folkloric status. What she proceeds to construct, however, is not a nursery story, but rather a study in repression related under the shadow of the inevitable foreknowledge both reader and author share which attempts to restore historical specificity to the familiar narrative. (159)

Firstly, as I have suggested, Carter’s story does not restore historical specificity to the narrative—it exaggerates historical detail (as Berni and others have observed) and, through narrative framing, as I have shown, depicts the de-historicization, the emblemization, of Lizzie as inevitable and inescapable. Secondly, I want to evaluate the possibility that what Carter constructs might be, in fact, precisely what Gamble argues it is not: a nursery rhyme. A postmodern bedtime story, a Lizzie Borden lullaby.

Drawing upon the broader consideration of Carter’s work in relation to “the literary Märchen,” Janet Langlois has written compellingly on the use of “fairy tale fragments” in “The Fall River Axe Murders,” noting that “Carter speculates on different ways one might ‘Märchen-ize’ Lizzie Borden’s story,” playing with the interplay between fairy tale and legend. Her analysis touches on a few nursery rhyme elements (Jack Spratt, for example), but focuses largely on the longer fairy tales proper (Hansel and Gretel, Sleeping Beauty, etc.). The role of the shorter, more emblemized, nursery rhymes has been largely unexplored in relation to the story, though they operate compellingly in relation to the performative themes introduced thus far. The nursery rhyme, leaving more “to the imagination,” so to speak, than any

other type of version (even the fairy tale), might be understood to lay bare the preconceptions by which readers' interpretations are shaped, emphasizing more than any other version the performative role of the reader in the fixing of narrative/cultural meaning; it is this aspect of the nursery rhyme with which Carter aligns "The Fall River Axe Murders."

One of the major arguments for a reading of Carter's story in terms of nursery rhyme is the prevalence of alliteration. "In a serge suit, one look at which would be enough to bring you out in *prickly* heat, Old Borden will *perambulate* the *perspiring* town, *truffling* for money like a *pig* until he will return home mid-morning to keep a *pressing* appointment with destiny" (301). Lizzie is "all *twang*, all *tension*, she is *taut* [...]" (316). At another moment, which sounds like part of a nursery rhyme in itself, "*Master* and *Mistress* share the *matrimonial* bed" (303). Lizzie "play *ducks* and *drakes* with her father's silver *dollars* if it so pleases her. He pays all her *dressmakers'* bills on the *dot* and how she loves to *dress* up fine! She is addicted to *dandyism*" (314). Of Andrew: "the *pure* flame of his *passion* has melted off his *flesh*, his *skin* sticks to his *bones* out of *sheer* *parsimony*. Perhaps it is from his first *profession* that he has acquired his *bearing* [...]" (307). He "held himself upright with such *ponderous* *assertion* it was a *perpetual* reminder to all who witnessed his *progress* how it is not *natural* [emphasis in original] to be upright" (307). As the examples above suggest, stuttering P's seem particularly pervasive—and P is for parricide. (Alliteration is contagious; I think this is an important aspect of Carter's point about the power of nursery rhyme.) Alliteration here has various functions. Firstly, to relate it to the arguments advanced thus far, alliteration is repetition with a difference in miniature. Secondly, it contributes to a stuttering effect in a story-long sentence Carter never quite spits out (through her refusal to

narrate the murders); it builds the anticipation that the story ultimately thwarts. I would like to present the stutter not as that of a repressed Freudian subject but of an incorrectly repeated (or to evoke the language of performativity, infelicitously uttered) nursery rhyme.

Thirdly, it evokes the ticking of a clock. (As mentioned earlier, Ducornet has likened the whole story to a tightly wound clock; for her, cyclic time is the defining metaphor of the tale, an approach commensurate with my reading of the story's determinism.) I would argue the ticking may also be taken as that of a time-bomb, which fits in with the text's suggestion of an inevitability inherent to the setting (the "Fall River" of its title). The ticking contributes to the aforementioned immense anticipation and suspense that ultimately allow for the glorious anti-climax of the story's "conclusion." It also problematically positions the story in relation to the Freudian "revenge and catharsis" narrative de Mille identifies as pervading the archive (de Mille *Dance of Death* 77). Finally, it evokes the nursery rhyme form, a form characterized by alliteration and defined by its repetition. The alliteration and certain syntactic choices create a singsong effect, drawing upon the musicality of the nursery rhyme as part of its determining power.

It is possible to argue on the basis of certain images and phrases, as well as on the prevalence of alliteration, for the intertextual relevance other nursery rhyme figures in the story. Consider, for instance, the description of the house and all its locked doors in which one room leads into the next, "upstairs and downstairs" (304), where outside there appears "a dark man," whenever Lizzie "cannot sleep" (311) Is this not, perhaps, the setting of a sinister Wee Willie Winkie, the alliterative character "who makes sure that all children are in bed and asleep"?:
 "Wee Willie Winkie runs through the town / Upstairs and downstairs in his night

gown, / Rapping at the window, crying through the lock, / Are the children all in bed, for it's past eight o'clock?" Wee Willie Winkie in his role as sleep-policeman is associated with the Sandman, a figure Carter evoked (via Hoffman, via Freud) in *The Magic Toyshop*.¹⁰⁹ His presence here in the form of the dark man provides a harbinger of death. Also "upstairs and downstairs" "wander[s]" Goosey Goosey Gander, upstairs and downstairs and in her "lady's chamber," like the pointlessly occupied and domestically confined Lizzie in her somnambulist trances. When Lizzie returns from her European tour, "home again" (314), is there not an echo of the old woman of nursery rhyme coming home from market ("Home again, home again, jiggy Jog")? While Lizzie does not buy a "fat pig," she finds one on her return: the stepmother who "oppresses her like a spell" has "grown fatter" (314). The stepmother is implicated in another rhyme when she "fancies Lizzie's slaughtered pigeons for a pie" (316); is this not also the pie of rhyme ("four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie")? These fragments hang in the periphery of the story, "fragments" of "the Märchen world," as Langlois notes.

By positioning the story in relation to the nursery rhyme (even, arguably, *as a* nursery rhyme), Carter opens the story up to interpretation in relation to the performative (rather than the psychoanalytical) aspects of her understanding of narrative and culture. The aforementioned tendency of "The Fall River Axe Murders," to give up and start over relates to the nursery rhyme in a potentially subversive way. In 1981, *Stand Magazine* published a short piece by Carter called, "Excerpts from a Work in Progress entitled 'The Fall River Axe Murders.'" It begins:

Still the little children skipping rope chant:

¹⁰⁹ Gamble 32-34.

Lizzie Borden with an axe
 Gave her mother forty whacks
 When she saw what she had done
 She gave her father forty-one
 ONE...two...three...four...and etc.

Then you go on skipping rope for as long as you are able, until you trip over the rope, or tangle it; it is a counting rhyme, it is a counting *out* rhyme. (34, emphasis in original)

This performance-, play-oriented understanding of the rhyme as an actual skipping-rope game (a passage omitted from the versions of the story printed in the *London Review of Books*, *Black Venus*, or *Saints and Strangers*¹¹⁰) lends a new context to the story, in its interruptions, its re-starts, its failed attempts. Twice during the opening pages of the *Stand* version of the story, Carter interrupts her narration to echo the jump/whack-counting children at play, positioning the numeric series as enactments of murder. She muses over the inclination of all children to kill their parents,

Is it any wonder they engage in vengeful fantasies of the orphaned, unhouseled state? ONE...two...three...four...and etc. Having successfully eliminated Mother, the first term of the syllogism of the self, and suffered no harm from it, the logic of the child at play dictates that Father, the second term, should be the next to go. (35)

She emphasizes the particularly female mode of transmission, displaying the tendency to gender essentialism for which she has often been criticized, “Now, you must remember that little boys do not skip rope; it is a play only for little girls...The crime of Oedipus is man against man; the little girls, negotiating the recurring arcs of the revolving rope, have chosen a hero of their own sex” (35). Reflecting on the derivation of Andrew’s name from the “same root” as “‘anthropophagi’, as in ‘the anthropophagi that do each other eat,’” she represents his murder:

“ONE...two...three...four... And when we have put away both Mother and Father,

¹¹⁰ The version in *Stand* is closer to the *Saints and Strangers* version than that printed in *Black Venus*, most notably in that it includes the lengthy passage about days on end of mutton-eating. For more on Mutton, see “Mutton” (Appendix).

then—then! We can skip rope as much as we please, play whatever games we want, we shall be at perfect liberty; especially if we have a quarter of a million dollars in our pocketbook” (35-36). In the *Stand Magazine* version of the story, then, Lizzie’s ironic freedom-within-constraint in “The Fall River Axe Murders” is associated with childhood play qua feminine athletic performance. The narrative hiccups are not (or not just) merely aesthetic; they are a formal metaphor for the tangling of the rope, the thwarting of whacks. The performative *failures* of the singing children effectively defer the murders, like Carter’s story, which draws the focus to the process by which Lizzie Borden comes to be understood, the unfinished quality of the narrative, rather than *what* she is inevitably understood *as*. This formulation, in its favourable positioning of performative play, places a paradoxical *value* upon the reductive process the story as a whole critiques. And given that the story also represents this reductive process as inevitable, this favourable positioning holds progressive potential. Even though narrative versions of the Lizzie Borden story are necessarily contextually determined in such a way that for Carter renders them ultimately “unfree,” their positioning in relation to feminine play as deferral of violence in *Stand* suggests the versioning (as narrative/cultural play) is still, in an important sense, worthwhile.

Given this complex relation of the story to the form of the nursery rhyme (and the corresponding emphasis on the performativity of the process whereby Lizzie Borden becomes defined), I would like to present a case for the determining role of a highly unexpected nursery rhyme intertext: Clement Clarke Moore’s “Twas the Night Before Christmas.” It might sound like rather a far-fetched allusion, but the resonances between the two texts are compelling. The parallel begins with the shared premise of the opening moments of the two stories: a house of sleeping creatures. In

Moore's poem, "All through the house / Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse." Carter, similarly, describes the Bordens as "creatures" ("Five living creatures are asleep at the house on second street" [301]) and describes the pervasive calm of the house: "Still, all still; in all the house nothing moving except the droning fly. Stillness on the staircase. Stillness pressing against the blinds. Stillness, mortal stillness in the room below" (303). Just as the narrator of Moore's "Twas the Night before Christmas" describes how "the children were nestled all snug in their beds, / While visions of sugar plums danced in their heads" the narrator of Carter's "The Fall River Axe Murders" takes us into the room of sleeping Lizzie, who—far from snug—sleeps restlessly, "the hem of her nightdress is rucked up above her knees," and "the youngest daughter dreams" not of sugar plums, but of freedom from her geographical and temporal constraints: "Is it not the 'naughty Nineties' everywhere but dour Fall River?...In New York Paris, London, champagne corks pop, in Monte Carlo the bank is broken, women fall backwards in a crisp meringue of petticoats for fun and profit..." (309). Moore's poem offers an image of the slumbering parents: "And mamma in her 'kerchief, and I in my cap, / Had just settled our brains for a long winter's nap." In parallel, "The Fall River Axe Murders" offers a view of the sleeping elder Bordens, lying back to back, "master and Mistress lie in the Matrimonial Bed," Andrew, indeed, in a "flannel nightcap" (308).

As they approach their respective endings, the narrative parallels between the stories are accentuated as the sentiment of "The Fall River Axe Murders" diverges from that of the rhyme, lending terrifying significance to the complex and unlikely allusion. In Moore's poem, a "clatter" draws the narrator to the window, through which he observes, outside, "a miniature sleigh, and eight tiny reindeer / With a little old driver, so lively and quick, I knew in a moment it must be St. Nick":

More rapid than eagles his coursers they came,
And he whistled, and shouted, and called them by name!

"Now Dasher! now, Dancer! now, Prancer and Vixen!
On, Comet! On, Cupid! on, on Donner and Blitzen!
To the top of the porch! to the top of the wall!
Now dash away! Dash away! Dash away all!"...

And then, in a twinkling, I heard on the roof
The prancing and pawing of each little hoof.
As I drew in my head, and was turning around,
Down the chimney St Nicholas came with a bound.

In "The Fall River Axe Murders," it is the mills of Fall River, icons of the story's material setting, that disturbs the story's prolonged and much-emphasized silence and stillness, and it is the mill that "whistles" and beckons—not reindeer, of course, but townspeople: "At the first stroke of the City Hall Clock, the first factory hooter blares, and then, on another note, another, and another, the Metacomet Mill, the American Mill, the Mechanics Mill...until every mill in the entire town sings out aloud in a common anthem of summoning and hot alleys where the factory folk live blacken with the hurrying throng."

Paralleling St. Nick's "Dash away!" Carter's narrative urges, "hurry! scurry!"—not "to the top of the porch! To the top of the wall!" to hasten the spread of festive cheer, but "to loom, to bobbin, to spindle, to dyeshop," to the sites of production epitomizing the historical setting whereby the people of Fall River, the characters of the Borden story, are themselves produced, produce themselves. Far from admitting a nocturnal benefactor ("down the chimney," "with a bound"), the "chimneys" of the Fall River mills "belch forth, the clang, bang, clatter of the mills commences." Though Lizzie, in bed, "all twang, all tension," is ready to "spring" like Moore's narrator, the day yet "trembles on the brink of beginning." The final lines of the story are devastating. In "The Fall River Axe Murders," it is not Santa,

the world's jolliest patriarch, on the roof of the Borden home, but death: "Outside, above, in the already burning air, see! The angel of death roosts on the roof-tree" (317).

What can this bizarre allusion mean for an interpretation of the story's understanding of narrative and culture in relation to the theoretical concerns of performativity? What function could the evocation of the Christmas rhyme, in particular, serve? For one thing, Christianity provided one of the most pervasive "grand narratives" that many postmodern writers like Carter treated as suspect; its singsongy and cultural (rather than explicitly religious) evocation in the rhyme might have appealed to her as "concealing" (in her terms) its darker content. (Berni identifies Christianity as one of the "systems of belief within which historical realities are shaped" that Carter targets in "The Fall River Axe Murders" [52].) That Carter was familiar with the rhyme and sensitive to its potentially un-rosy implications is suggested in her lightly historicizing 1986 piece for the *New York Times*, "Christmas Books: Is Santa Claus Really St. Nicholas Or Just Some Jolly, Beery Old Elf?" in which, among other hilarious attacks on poor St. Nick, she suggests that—given the Surgeon General's warning about the damaging impact of smoking on health—the lines, "The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth / And the smoke it encircled his head like a wreath," ought to have been followed by, "And that explains why he was quite out of breath," for example. Or, at the risk of casting a blight on the festive season: "So little he knew he was dicing with death." The tone of the piece certainly suggests some suspicion as to the ideology informing the narrative power of the rhyme.

More pertinent to "The Fall River Axe Murders," though, is the poem's association with anticipation. "The Fall River Axe Murders" is a tale of extremely

tense and ultimately unfulfilled anticipation. Consider, for instance, the following example:

The city hall clock whirrs and sputters the prolegomena to the first stroke of six and Bridget's alarm clock gives a sympathetic skip and click as the minute-hand stutters on the hour; back the little hammer jerks, about to hit the bell on top of her clock, but Bridget's damp eyelids do not shudder with premonition [... Bridget] needs the alarm as well as all the factory whistles that are just about to blast off, just this very second about to blast off... (302-303)

These lines suspend time agonizingly in the moments before the actual start of “the” Lizzie Borden story, suspend us in our own problematic expectations as readers of a retold legend. The “skip and click” are “sympathetic” not only to Bridget in allowing her a few moments more sleep, but to us as readers, allowing us to progress one “tick” nearer to the murders we so eagerly await, to the violent explosion to which the narrative counts down.¹¹¹

Carter has alluded to “Twas the Night Before Christmas” in the context of anticipation elsewhere in her work. In *The Magic Toyshop*, she uses the phrase “a *night-before-Christmas* look” to describe “a richly expectant atmosphere of surprise packages” (84). The poem also features in “The Ghost Ships: A Christmas Story,” in *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders*. Its evocation in that context is relevant: “Twas the *night before Christmas*. Silent night, holy night. The snow lay deep and crisp and even. Etc. etc. etc.; let these familiar words conjure up the traditional anticipatory magic of Christmas Eve, and then—forget it” (89). Given Carter’s interest in fairy tales and nursery rhymes, there could be no more telling metaphor for readers’ eager suspense, indeed, desire for the narration of Lizzie’s violence—so adeptly cultivated throughout “The Fall River Axe Murders”—than

¹¹¹ The narrative literally counts down. From “five creatures” (301), after the elimination of Morse, we are left with “one man and his two women ;” (302); this is an inversion of the children’s game, which counts *up* whacks.

that of a child at Christmas, a veritable archetype for anticipation: a perfect candidate for postmodern critique.

The interpretation of the anticipation of Christmas as a troubling metaphor for the problematic desire of Lizzie Borden readers to see her violence enacted in narrative is supported by a parallel comment on readerly desire in Carter's own Lizzie Borden intertext, the short story, "Lizzie's Tiger." Ten years after the original publication of "The Fall River Axe Murders," Carter—like so many of her fellow Borden-renderers—revisited her subject. "Lizzie's Tiger," which was first published in *Cosmopolitan* magazine in 1991, presents not a sequel to "The Fall River Axe Murders," not the fulfilment of the desire for violence with which "The Fall River Axe Murders" concluded, but a prequel. "Lizzie's Tiger" explores a different but related (and similarly problematic) desire for a different kind of exoneration: the desire to see a young Lizzie traumatized—especially sexually. "Lizzie's Tiger" imposes ironically adult impulses and intentions upon a four-year-old girl who, wandering unaccompanied to and through a circus, gets molested by a tiger-tamer and then undergoes a bizarre psychic engagement with a tiger. That the story's "Lizzie" is actually Lizzie Borden, *our* Lizzie, is not revealed until its final lines. "Lizzie's Tiger" plays upon the desire of readers to interpret Lizzie as disempowered or exonerated not through the proliferation of her motives or her reduction to rhyme, as in "The Fall River Axe Murders," but through the reduction of the characters of her story to essentialising Freudian subject positions. Janet Langlois offers an interpretation of the story in this context that—as Alice Morrison Mordoh puts it—"notes phallic and paternal connections that are so overblown they seem to be a deliberate parody of Freudians' projective readings of folktales" (347). "Gratuity," mutters the tiger-tamer, flipping Lizzie a coin for her sexual favour, and that is

exactly the concept with which the story plays. Whereas “The Fall River Axe Murders” piques readers’ desire for violence then refuses to fulfil it, “Lizzie’s Tiger” builds anticipation of childhood sexual abuse and then fulfils it, explicitly, but narrates it without fanfare through Lizzie’s perspective, relegating the positioning of the event as a trauma to the perception of readers, emphasising—like “The Fall River Axe Murders”—the performativity of interpretation in the construction of the Lizzie Borden figure.

"The Fall River Axe Murders" comments critically on the power of nursery rhyme patterns to shape readers' understandings of a text (historical, folkloric, fairy tale, or otherwise). At the same time, with irony, it enacts the reductive tendency of those patterns. Through its framed representations of narrative contingency (its emblemization of narrative contingency, even) through repetitions, and by offering gratuitously proliferating options all of which serve more or less the same narrative function, the text suggests that narratives are ultimately determined by the cultural contexts in which they are “performed” because they are always limited by their implied referentiality to that which they represent, in however proliferatingly varied a way. The intertextual engagement with “Twas the Night Before Christmas,” in its emblematic representation of childhood anticipatory desire, enables a comment upon readerly anticipation and the way in which we aim to close down meaning into pre-determined, because pre-existing, ends. The evocation of the rhyme links childhood desires and the power of the nursery rhyme to adult readerly desires and the similarly reductive narrative scripts that shape our interpretations. Taken in combination, these various facets of the text suggest that it does not matter if as readers we're given a million options of varying complexity and sophistication (as in *Legend* or "The Fall River Axe Murders") or just one (as in the nursery rhyme), because for Carter the

one always implies the million, and vice versa (a consequence of her view of versioning as the activation of "latent content").

An image from "The Fall River Axe Murders" serves to encapsulate this formulation. The narrative compares Lizzie to a wind-harp: "Her hands and feet twitch in her sleep; the nerves and muscles of this complicated mechanism won't relax, just won't relax, she is all twang, all tension, she is taut as the strings of a wind-harp from which random currents of the air pluck out tunes that are not our tunes" (316). In addition to its problematic suggestion that her cultural contexts elicit involuntary violence from Lizzie, the wind-harp provides a metaphor for Carter's concept of narrative. The wind may pluck out any string, any number of strings, in any order or combination, but no manner of plucking ever changes the wind-harp. Even if the version is unfamiliar ("not our tunes"), it is still a version, and thus defined by its relation to the wind-harp (the "unfree society" in which we live). The image of the wind-harp thus represents the limit of Carter's performative understanding of the cultural function of narrative, however innovative for its time.

Epilogue: Contemporary Lizzies and Narrative/Culture Today

Surrounding the 1992 centennial of the murders, Lizzie Borden text production increases significantly. Non-fictional and fictional treatments of the story abound. An academic conference (of which the proceedings are later published), is organized in recognition of the anniversary, attracting historians, criminologists, literary critics, and other enthusiasts.¹¹² The late 90s and 2000s see a huge range of Lizzies, unprecedented in variety as well in number. Lizzie appears in a graphic novel,¹¹³ in verse,¹¹⁴ and in drama.¹¹⁵ She makes *Simpsons* cameos¹¹⁶ and features in an *Ally McBeal/The Practice* crossover episode.¹¹⁷ Her ballet and opera are reprised.¹¹⁸ Lizzie shares her name not just with a feminist film director,¹¹⁹ but with a metal band,¹²⁰ as well as with a pro-wrestler/porn-star indicted for obscenity.¹²¹ There are new theories, with new suspects, new motives;¹²² there are new movies.¹²³ The house in which the murders were committed is a bed-and-breakfast;¹²⁴ there are "Ghost Hunters";¹²⁵ there is merchandise.¹²⁶ Lizzie appears in a musical,¹²⁷ a one-

¹¹² See Ryckebusch.

¹¹³ See Geary.

¹¹⁴ See Hadas or Baggott.

¹¹⁵ See *Lizzie's Tempest* or *Miss Lizzie A. Borden Invites You to Tea*.

¹¹⁶ See episode "Cape Feare," for instance.

¹¹⁷ See "The Inmates" (*Ally McBeal*) and "Axe Murderer" (*The Practice*).

¹¹⁸ On the ballet reprisal, see Dunning. On the opera reprisal, see Tommassini.

¹¹⁹ Lizzie Borden (famous director of feminist classic *Born in Flames*)

¹²⁰ Lizzie Borden and the Axes

¹²¹ Her real name is Janet Romano. She spells Lizzie with a "y." (On legal action, see Lichtblau.)

¹²² See, for instance, Rehak.

¹²³ *The Curse of Lizzie Borden* (2006) and *Lizzie* (2011).

¹²⁴ See *Lizzie Borden Bed and Breakfast/Museum*.

¹²⁵ See "Shawshank Prison/Lizzie Borden."

¹²⁶ The bed-and-breakfast gift shop sells Lizzie-inspired key-chains, T-shirts, coffee mugs, etc. See www.lizzie-borden.com/giftshop.aspx.

¹²⁷ See Macdonald.

woman show,¹²⁸ and—most recently—a rock opera.¹²⁹ The internet, needless to say, fuels the fire.

The most defining features of the Lizzies of today are without a doubt their prevalence and their variety; today's Lizzies are uniquely and entertainingly over-the-top. They continue to be of particular interest, though, in their relation to one another, to history, and to the phenomenon of Lizzie Borden versiondom, which is more complex and more challenging than ever. It would be impossible to generalize across this period, but I will provide just one example of the light-hearted self-reflexivity that characterizes a number of contemporary versions.

The website of the Yellow Tulip Press, a publisher of “Curious Chap[book]s and Hysterical Histories,” one of which features Lizzie Borden, offers its users a page called “The Lizzie Borden Verse Box.” At the top of the page, viewers are offered the opportunity to buy a set of Lizzie Borden novelty refrigerator magnets, featuring words associated with the Lizzie Borden story. The product description reads,

WE ALL KNOW WHAT CAN HAPPEN when you repress your emotions (just ask Lizzie). So let them run free with our exclusive **LIZZIE BORDEN VERSE BOX**. It comes with all the words you need to display your musings about the Fall River murders—and your genius—on the fridge or other magnetic surface. Makes a unique and thoughtful gift.

The word magnets come with a complimentary magnetic photo of Lizzie. Beneath the product information is an online version of the magnets (“Try it now!” the site urges), which are scattered irregularly on a background plastered with rows of a famous photo of Lizzie, sepia-tinted. The magnets can be dragged and dropped to arrange into lines. “Just use your mouse to move the tiles around and write your own

¹²⁸ See *Lizzie Borden Live*.

¹²⁹ See www.lizziebordentheshow.com.

creepy yet sensitive Lizzie Borden poetry. When you're done, type up your poem in the form below and send it to us. We'll post it on our Virtual Fridge!" (The "Virtual Fridge" is another page of the site devoted to user-submitted poetry.) The magnets contain a lot of words recognizable only to those familiar with the details of the case and its aftermath in legend: "Nance" (O'Neill),¹³⁰ "Frugal" (a reference to the stereotype of Andrew as miser), "Lizbeth" (Lizzie's post-trial alias),¹³¹ "Uncle," "Forty," "Barn," "Mutton," "Emma." It also features words less specifically related to the case, such as "Scream," "Cramped," "Forbidding," and "Taunt."

To me, the "Lizzie Borden Virtual Verse Box" is both an amusing example and a useful metaphor for interpreting contemporary Lizzie Borden versioning. Its virtual form, its emphasis on the commodity status of the legend (the magnets are yours for just \$9.95), its irreverence, and its lack of interest in historical authority all resonate with contemporary Lizzies more broadly. The concept of the verse box is similar to the way versioners, as we have seen in relation to the chapters of this thesis, often conceive of the versioning process: as the selection and arrangement of existing narrative elements. The words represent the narrative elements "taken up" by a given version, and the drag-and-drop mechanism parallels the conventional discursive processes of selection and ordering.

Interestingly, the selection of magnet words contains very few connecting words ("and," "the," "is," and so forth); in fact, it is difficult to even compose a complete sentence using just the words offered. The form below the "Verse Box," however, through which users can submit their poetry, does not restrict users to just the words from the magnets; users may type whatever they wish, and the "Virtual

¹³⁰ A reference to Nance O'Neil, Lizzie's actress friend and the source of many rumours as to Lizzie's lesbianism. See "Lizzie and Lesbianism" (Appendix).

¹³¹ See "Post-Trial" (Appendix).

Fridge” contains almost exclusively poems that could not have been composed using the actual “magnets.” In other words, though the possibilities are presented as finite, the website actually accepts and indeed takes for granted that they are known to be infinite. The process of selection and ordering whereby the website suggests its users will create their poems is almost a joke, for the website—in accepting poems using words not offered by the magnets—takes for granted that the poetry will be composed by means of far more complex processes. The *inadequacy* of the available magnets (symbolizing the inadequacy of the concept of versioning as the narrativizing of elements from a pre-set and often implicitly finite array), is thus actually *built in* to the “Verse Box” website.

The “Verse Box” dons the versioning heritage that it undermines performatively, to deconstructive ends. It embodies the inadequacy of the selection-and-ordering concept of narrative through its own form, but it nonetheless offers users an array of what it represents as the stuff of prior versions (and, thus, potential versions). This combination undermines not only the finitude of the hypostasized pre-narrative array for this version, but for all versions.

Like Lizzie, performativity thrives in feminisms and cultural studies of the 2000s, enjoying an enormous variety of fruitful interdisciplinary applications, decreasingly embroiled in the dead-end debates of identity politics. Of particular note are its applications to material feminisms, where its ability to negotiate the bodily and the symbolic combines with its historicizing function to enable progressive interpretive possibilities, as well as to queer and transgender projects, where its deconstructive function is often particularly prized. Performance studies,

inspired by performativity, is an established discipline with myriad strands.¹³² Diane Negra's *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity and Popular Culture*, and particularly her own introduction to the collection, provides a compelling example of the unique ways in which performativity stands to illuminate complex contemporary political concerns.

In the field of narrative, too, performativity remains a popular framework. It is a recurring theme in the recent collection *Theorizing Narrativity* (2008), and it continues to feature in contemporary articles on narrative theory.¹³³ Performativity also illuminates contemporary narratological concerns not explicitly approached in terms of performativity, but to which—in questioning the relationship between text and context—the concept clearly applies. One of the questions underlying Brian Richardson's recent study of narrative beginnings, for example, though it is not framed in these terms, is how when it comes to “origins,” narrative beginnings enact that to which they seem to refer. Similarly, Susan Lanser, in a paper on “Negative Plotting” considers the extent to which readers understand narrative events in terms of their implied alternatives, raising questions of relevance to the performative questioning of symptomatic reading presented in this thesis (Lanser).¹³⁴ While Lanser does not explicitly position her argument in relation to symptomatic reading, her project—like this one—operates on the level of the scrutiny of interpretive frames I have derived from Butler in this thesis as an alternative to symptomatic reading.

¹³² See Schechner.

¹³³ For a very useful bibliography, see Berns.

¹³⁴ Similar concepts are evoked in an interdisciplinary context as well. See *Beyond Narrative Coherence* on “side-shadowing” (10).

Lanser's consideration of "negative plotting," which is sensitive to the contextual situatedness of the interpreter, resonates very closely with Culler's chapter on "Interpretation: Defending 'Overinterpretation,'" a response to Umberto Eco's *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, and all three texts consider the readerly processes whereby interpretations are shaped rather than examining the effects of those properties as if deriving from within the text.

Culler's defence of "overinterpretation" is based in part upon the argument that some of what Eco regards as overinterpretation is in fact, "underinterpretation," inattention to the text and its contextual resonances (*Literary in Theory* 169). I would argue that symptomatic reading, which—in its attribution of hidden meaning to text—seems most prone to critique as overinterpretation, might likewise be understood in a context of underinterpretation. Because symptomatic reading is necessarily insensitive to the contextual situation of the interpreter, it overlooks or actively conceals the frames that shape interpretation, thus limiting the scope of interpretive possibility.

Culler also defends "overinterpretation" on the basis that "It would be sad indeed if fear of overinterpretation should lead us to avoid or repress the state of wonder at the play of texts and interpretation" (182). On the contrary, in "working out and proposing interpretations," Culler suggests,

critics [...] should apply as much interpretive pressure as they can, should carry their thinking as far as it can go. [E]xtreme [readings...] have a better chance, it seems to me, of bringing to light connections or implications not previously noticed or reflected on than if they strive to remain 'sound' or moderate. (169)

—especially, I might add, if they are advanced in the spirit of non-exclusive authority. By doing "just"-ice (in the sense in which Sharon Marcus uses the term) to the material as presented, by using interpretive frames self-consciously and not only

acknowledging but probing and taking advantage of the political desires, cultural circumstances, social pressures, and so forth by which they reveal themselves to be shaped, it is possible, as Culler suggests, to “bring to light connections or implications not previously noticed or reflected,” even if that means sacrificing on some level the “sound” or “moderate” quality associated with the advancement of an argument as authoritative.

Reflecting on the benefit of a bit of what Umberto Eco would regard as “paranoid interpretation,” Culler argues for a shift from the receiving of intended messages” to “the mechanisms of linguistic and social interaction” (174), to

a poetics that attempts to describe the conventions and strategies by which literary works achieve the effects they do [...] to explore the mechanisms or structures by which they function and thus to illuminate general problems about literature, narrative, figurative language, themes, and so on. (174)

This idea closely parallels what I have taken from Butler as the need to subject to critical scrutiny the very frames whereby interpretations are structured. Reading in this way might be understood as “extreme” or a “paranoid” because it does not pretend to limit the scope of analysis to elements deriving “from” the text in the formalist sense. In its emphasis on how we make meaning from texts, it parallels the way in which Butler suggests we approach gender, by examining “how we initially make sense of it—rather than how it really is” (Chambers and Carver 39).

In the chapters of this thesis, I have argued for a performative approach to the relationship between text and context, exploring what it means that Lizzie Borden versions operate the way that they do. Chapter One considered the consequences of reading “The Long Arm” in relation to the Alice Mitchell story as opposed to the Lizzie Borden story, analysing how the privileging of one particular form of contextual reading over others has limited the potential for subversive readings of the

text. In Chapter Two, I examined the limits of the preferred psychoanalytic frame of analysis for the interpretation of Agnes de Mille's *Fall River Legend*, revealing an overlooked historical allegory by loosening the narrative's Freudian ties. In Chapter Three, I explored a sense in which *The Legend of Lizzie Borden* may be understood to use interpretive frames to present an anti-feminist comment on its second-wave contexts, arguing that in its convoluted form and content, the movie deconstructs to affirm that the relationship between a text and context can never be determined in advance. Finally, in Chapter Four, I considered the way that performativity itself can function to foreclose rather than to open up possibility (can serve as a frame that, in and of itself, requires contextualization, historicization, and so forth), demonstrating a valuable overlooked context for Carter's short story. In each case, the outward movement toward the consideration of interpretive frames, which I regard as definitive of what I have presented as a performative approach, offers not only a new (sometimes, "extreme") interpretation but a comment on the mechanisms of interpretation, too.

Ute Berns, reflecting on the complex history of performativity in his entry on "performativity" suggests that "narratological study of performativity offers the potential of complementing structural analysis of narrative with analysis of its communication situation that is culturally and historically specific" ("performativity"). As this thesis has shown, the greatest use of performativity lies not in its application to narrative for narrative's sake nor to culture for culture's sake, but at the performative intersection of the narrative and the cultural, an intersection uniquely illuminated by the complex versioning of the Lizzie Borden phenomenon.

Appendix: “The” Historical Lizzie

Despite my much-expounded scepticism as to the possibility of attaining an authoritative account of Lizzie Borden, I appreciate that it is nonetheless necessary to an appreciation of the versions that I offer my readers some sense of the basic historical facts and fictions associated with the case. I have not yet known a version of these details to emerge that does not face brutal criticism amongst the community of ardent Borden enthusiasts for historical inaccuracy of some kind. I am sure my rendition will be no exception, so to the Borden buffs into whose eager hands this volume will no doubt one day fall: forgive me. (Here goes.)

On August 4th, 1892, around 11 a.m., Abby and Andrew Borden were found murdered in their home on Second Street in Fall River, Massachusetts. Andrew’s daughter Lizzie claimed to have returned to the house from the barn to find the badly mangled body of her father on the sitting room couch where he had been napping. She called for Bridget Sullivan, the family maid, who was resting in her attic bedroom at the time. Lizzie asked Bridget to go fetch the family doctor, Dr. Seabury Bowen. Mrs. Churchill, the Borden’s next-door neighbour, saw Lizzie looking rather “excited or agitated, as if something had happened” (Pearson *Trial* 347) inside the side screen door of the house. She called out to her. Lizzie replied, according to Mrs. Churchill’s later testimony, “Oh, Mrs. Churchill, do come over. Someone has killed father.”¹³⁵

Mrs. Churchill came over. Bridget had returned from the Bowens’ alone, as Dr. Bowen was out, and was sent to summon Lizzie’s friend Alice Russell. Lizzie

¹³⁵ Radin notes that contrary to Churchill’s and Bridget’s testimony (which wavered on this point), Lizzie claimed she initially informed them her father had been “hurt,” a claim substantiated by her request for a doctor and the fact that when Cunningham contacted police, he reported not a murder but a “row,” but rendered unlikely by the very visibly mutilated condition of Andrew Borden (65).

repeated her request for a doctor to Mrs. Churchill, who ran out to send for one. She was overheard dispatching her “yardman” for the purpose by a nearby news dealer, John Cunningham, who contacted the police and the local papers. Churchill returned, Dr. Bowen arrived, and Bridget and Alice soon followed. Dr. Bowen examined Andrew and estimated that he had been dead for roughly twenty minutes; blood was still flowing from some of the wounds. Bowen’s impression was that the fatal wounds had probably been inflicted with an axe.

Officer Allen was the first officer on the scene. He briefly assessed the situation then instructed housepainter John S. Sawyer, who had been working across the street, to guard the door while he went for backup. Dr. Bowen covered Andrew’s body with a sheet and then went to telegraph Lizzie’s sister, Emma, who was visiting friends in Fairhaven at the time.

Mrs. Churchill asked Lizzie where Mrs. Borden was, and Lizzie replied that her step-mother had gone out earlier that morning after receiving a note saying someone was ill (Radin 68).¹³⁶ She then added, ominously, “I don’t know but she is killed too” (Radin 68, Sullivan 94). She asked Bridget to go see if Abby was in the house, but Bridget was frightened to go on her own, so Mrs. Churchill accompanied her. They found Mrs. Borden lying dead, face down in the guest room, where she had been making the bed, between the bed and the wall on the far side of the room from the stairs. Dr. Bowen’s examination of the body upon his return from the telegraph office revealed she had been dead some time longer than her husband.

A small crowd began to gather outside the Borden house. The Bordens were a wealthy, prominent local family, known mostly for Andrew’s involvement with

¹³⁶ Lizzie testified at the initial inquest that she asked Mrs. Churchill about Mrs. Borden, not vice versa (Kent and Flynn 88).

Fall River banks and property. John Vinnicum Morse, the brother of Andrew's first wife, Sarah, arrived at the house around a quarter to 12. He had come from out of town, unexpectedly, the night before and had spent the morning visiting family elsewhere in Fall River. The night before the murders, he had slept in the guest room in which Abby's body was found. Morse was informed of the murders. The medical examiner, Dr. William A. Dolan, was the next to arrive, followed by more police. Reporters began to arrive at the scene. Police questioned Lizzie and other witnesses and performed an initial search of the house and grounds.

As word began to travel regarding the goings on at the Borden house, Fall River went into a high state of panic. In the figurative and dramatic narrative style characteristic of his 1893 account, Edmond Porter relates,

At high noon on Thursday the fourth of August, 1892, the cry of murder swept through the city of Fall River like a typhoon on the smooth surface of an eastern sea. It was caught up by a thousand tongues and repeated at every street corner until it reached the utmost confines of the municipality. (3)

With equal poetry, Porter describes how the street outside the Borden home soon became "blocked with a surging mass of humanity" (4). Radin's description, less florid, is equally striking (and somewhat more specifically informative):

As news of the murders spread quickly through the town, many workmen abandoned their machines and dashed out of the factories. Others never returned from their noontime meal. By early afternoon most of the mills shut down for the day, not out of respect for Andrew Borden, but simply because there were so few workers still on the job. Thousands of them gathered in Second Street in a tightly packed, hot and sweating mass, filling the street and roadway from side to side, blocking all traffic. (71)

The extreme immediate reaction of the residents of Fall River was just the beginning of a much broader response to the murders. Regional papers released "new editions of extras almost hourly, and many of the same readers bought several editions"

(Radin 73). National reporters flocked to Fall River. The public demand for information was immense, but facts were sparse.

Morse was the first major suspect, being male and having arrived just the night before, without forewarning and bearing no luggage. He was also known to keep slightly less-than-upstanding company. Unfortunately for Lizzie, though, his alibi was pretty airtight:¹³⁷ he had been across town with his niece at the time of the murders. The investigation continued in earnest, but false leads were rampant. Police “were flooded by reports about mysterious and sometimes blood-soaked strangers wandering around everywhere” (Radin 80). Physician Ben Handy claimed to have seen a suspicious “wild-eyed” character near the Borden home on the morning of the murders, a report upon which paper’s eagerly seized, but of which ultimately nothing came.¹³⁸

Alluding to various suggestions that were made as to the possible perpetrator in the early days of the investigation, Pearson describes a

comic chorus of Wild-Eyed People, Portuguese farm labourers, men who might have quarrelled with Mr. Borden, gypsy horse traders in Westport, mysterious loafers or unknown buggy drivers on Second Street, men brandishing axes in gloomy glades, chicken farmers with bloodstained hatchets in South Somerset, men who had stolen pears and jumped over the fence, Frenchmen who were running from something or other, and sailors who had mutinied, sixteen years before, on a ship which had no connection whatsoever with Mr Borden [...] (*Trial 37*)

Police allegedly followed up every lead, no matter how remote. The efficiency of the police in their handling of the case is hotly debated, but that they received heavy criticism at the time is incontrovertible.

¹³⁷ A little too airtight, some have suggested (Pearson *Trial 34*).

¹³⁸ Nothing, that is, apart from the arrest of a wild-eyed local drunk known as “Mike the Soldier,” whom Handy eventually confirmed was not the man he had seen on the morning of the murders (Radin 91-2).

Lizzie and Emma advertised a reward of £5,000 in the *Fall River News* on the Saturday after the murders to “the person or persons, who occasioned the death of Mr Andrew J Borden and Wife” (Radin 82). The papers, though, and particularly *The Globe*, were increasingly focusing on Lizzie as a suspect. *The Globe* published an interview with Andrew’s sister’s husband, Hiram Harrington, with whom Borden had fallen out some years prior, in which he made damaging remarks as to Lizzie’s character, her behaviour after the murders, and the relationships between the members of the Borden family. As one “outside” suspect after another was ruled out, the police investigation likewise began to hone in on the Borden household.

The same day the reward was advertised, Andrew’s and Abby’s funeral was held at the house on Second Street. Over 3,000 people showed up outside to observe.¹³⁹ Lizzie and Emma wore black but did not wear veils, a choice much scrutinized thereafter. After the funeral, police came to the house and—reluctantly, it seems—informed Lizzie that she was a suspect and “advised” that she and the other members of the household remain in the house for the following days (Radin 84).

An inquest was held over the next few days, in which—as apparently permitted by Massachusetts law—Lizzie was questioned by the prosecutor, Hosea M. Knowlton, and a judge, without counsel (Radin 86). After the inquest, Lizzie was arrested and broke down sobbing in a rare display of emotion in public (Radin 87). She was taken to Taunton Jail, where she was held until her formal hearing before the District Court.

The District Court hearing lasted a week and concluded with now-famous remarks by Judge Blaisdell (who had, customarily but nonetheless controversially,

¹³⁹ The approximation is rough, as the figure is estimated quite variably between sources. *The New York Times* reported “between 3,000 and 4,000,” which is the figure Porter puts forward. Pearson describes “several thousand” (*Trial* 19). Radin alleges “4,000” (82).

also overseen the inquest), which always strike me as comprising one of the most powerful (indeed astonishing) moments recorded in the months following the murders:

Suppose for a single moment a man was standing there. He was found close by that guest chamber which, to Mrs Borden, was a chamber of death. Suppose a man had been found in the vicinity of Mr Borden, was the first to find the body, and the only account he could give of himself was the unreasonable one that he was out in the barn looking for sinkers; then he was out in the yard; then he was out for something else; would there be any question in the minds of men what should be done with such a man? So, there is only one thing to do, painful as it may be—the judgment of the Court is that you are probably guilty, and you are ordered committed to await the action of the Superior Court. (quoted in Porter 139-140, Pearson 22, Radin 95)

Astoundingly, Judge Blaisdell reportedly had to “pause in his brief remarks to wipe away his tears” (quoted in Kent and Flynn 189). *The New York Times* reported that “half the people in the court” were “in tears and the others white with nervous excitement” (quoted in Kent and Flynn 189). The contrasting composure of Lizzie Borden, whose emotional restraint received much attention throughout her treatment in the news, made the subheading of the article: “The Prisoner Calm Before a Weeping Judge” (“Probable Guilt”). Lizzie was sent back to Taunton jail to await trial.

The trial began on the fifth of June, 1893. Lizzie was represented by the Borden family lawyer, Andrew Jennings, and former Massachusetts governor George Robinson. Arthur S. Phillips, who later wrote an essay in support of Lizzie’s innocence in his *The Philips History of Fall River*, also assisted the defence. District Attorney Knowlton and William H. Moody prosecuted. Thirteen days later, as the trial was coming to a close, Lizzie was permitted a statement. She said, “I am innocent. I leave it to my counsel to speak for me.” After just over an hour’s deliberation, the jury announced their verdict: “Not Guilty.”

Porter concludes his rather damning account of the Lizzie Borden story with lines he must have expected to be interpreted as tongue-in-cheek: “Thus ended, on the thirteenth day, the famous trial of Lizzie Borden, and she returned guiltless to her friends and home in Fall River” (312). No other suspect was ever tried for the murders of Abby and Andrew Borden. Lizzie bore an enormous stigma after the close of the trial, and in some ways her “ordeal” (as a cultural construct, anyway) was just beginning.

So controversial are the events of the morning of the murders prior to the discovery of the bodies, the lives of the Bordens up to that day, and the details of Lizzie’s life after the trial, it is almost impossible to continue in even the self-reflexive narrative mode I have adopted thus far. Above, I have endeavoured to offer some sort of a broad consensus among non-fiction sources, a sense of key perspectives and a flavour of the tone and perspective of some of the more significant sources. Henceforth, I shall admit alongside fragments non-fictional in origin some of the “freewheeling flights of fancy and fiction,” as Radin puts it (10), that inform the legend as embraced by the authors, choreographer and filmmakers explored in the chapters of this thesis, including some based solely (as far as I can tell) in fiction. Here are some of the most popularly referenced (and some of the most contentious) facets of the Lizzie Borden *legend*. Rather than continuing in the form of a narrative proper, I offer these details as fragments, to emphasise their status as alleged contextual elements, “taken up” by some versions of the story and not others.

Before the Murders

The Setting: Fall River and New England

Fall River, a patriotic New England mill town, grew rapidly over the nineteenth century. Xenophobia, directed particularly toward the Irish (as often symbolized in the form of Bridget, the Irish maid), Portuguese, and French Canadians, was rampant. Classism, an old/new money divide, and religious prejudice are likewise purported. Fictional treatments engage with the geographic setting of the story in a wide variety of ways. *The Legend of Lizzie Borden* includes without comment an image of a sign on a shop door that reads “Irish keep out,” whereas the prejudices against French Canadians are a major focus of Angela Carter’s “Lizzie’s Tiger.” The role of class in the Borden trial is explored in Jones (*Women Who Kill*) and Radin.

The House

In non-fictional and fictional versions of the story, much is made of the layout of the house, which was originally designed for two families. “Severely plain and narrow” (Radin 24-25) and “utterly devoid of grace or charm” (de Mille *Dance of Death* 20), the house was designed such that it was necessary “to walk through succeeding rooms” in order to travel around it. The only running water was in a first-floor sink, and there were no gas lights or indoor plumbing (just a cellar lavatory) (Radin 24-25). The house was in a relatively “unfashionable” neighbourhood, and it was reported as peculiar that Andrew—who could very easily have afforded it—refused either to improve the house or to move the family elsewhere. As de Mille puts it, “No one was socially elite who lived south of Franklin Street or west of Rock

Street. The Bordens' surroundings rankled in Lizzie's heart as much as the Borden deprivations" (*Dance of Death* 17). Lizzie and Emma exchanged bedrooms two years before the murders when Emma offered Lizzie hers, which was superior, as a gift on her thirtieth birthday (Radin 32). The family used a farm in Swansea as a summer retreat (Radin 23). The constraints of the Borden home are often linked to the tensions in the Borden household, as when de Mille writes, "The emotional schism in the family was reflected in the physical layout of the rooms" (*Dance of Death* 21).

Andrew's Ring

Andrew was buried wearing a "school ring" that Lizzie had given him on his little finger (Porter 209, Pearson *Trial* 269-270, Radin 32-33, de Mille 20, Sullivan 157). At the trial, it was used to demonstrate the loving bond between Andrew and Lizzie, but needless to say, subsequent renderings (like *The Legend of Lizzie Borden*, for instance) have interpreted it less innocently.

Lizzie's European Tour

Two years before the murders, Lizzie went with a group of other women from Fall River on a tour of Europe. She visited England, Scotland, France and Italy. Lizzie went to many museums and corresponded with her family by mail (Radin 33). Europe is often implied as the site of Lizzie's transformation, the trip positioned either as a source of corruption or of feminist awakening, where the seed was planted that would ultimately lead her to murder. See for instance Hunter, Engstrom.

The Financial Dispute

Lizzie and Emma testified to one instance of serious dissent in the Borden household. Five years prior to the murders, Andrew bought out Abby's stepmother's portion of a house of which she shared ownership with Abby's half-sister, Sarah Whitehead, so that the former could get her share out of the property, and the latter could continue living there. The girls felt it was unfair for Andrew to make such a generous gesture toward Abby's family. "What he did for her people, he ought to do for his own children," Lizzie testified at the inquest. To resolve the situation, Andrew gave Lizzie and Emma a house on Ferry Street of equal value to the portion of the Whiteheads' he had purchased for Abby. After the incident, although the family apparently reconciled, Lizzie began calling Abby Borden "Mrs. Borden" instead of "Mother," as she always had previously (Radin 33-4). Emma had always called Abby Borden by her first name. She testified that although Lizzie and Abby eventually resumed "cordial" relations after the financial dispute, her own relationship with Mrs. Borden was never the same thereafter (Pearson 294). One of my favourite moments from the Borden inquest transcript occurs when eventual-prosecutor Knowlton asks Lizzie if her relations with her stepmother prior to the quarrel were "cordial." Lizzie replies, so intriguingly, "It depends on one's idea of cordiality, perhaps" (Kent and Flynn 56).

The Robberies

There were a few theft-related incidents in the years preceding the murders. The barn was robbed twice, allegedly by boys in search of pigeons (more on pigeons later). More significant, though, was the "daylight robbery" of the Borden house, in which a watch, a chain, some money and car tickets were supposedly taken

(testimony of Alice Russell quoted in Pearson *Trial* 150). Allegedly, Andrew started locking his bedroom door at night after that, which would seem to suggest that he suspected someone in the family. Confusingly, though, he always left the key on the mantle. Also, there is nothing to show that Andrew hadn't always locked his bedroom door. In fact, most doors were customarily locked in the Borden house (Bellesiles 265).

Pigeons

Lizzie, a lover of animals, kept pigeons in the barn loft. One day at the beginning of the summer of the murders, Andrew killed them, allegedly to deter neighbourhood children from coming into the yard. It is not clear whether he “wrung their necks” or beheaded them, but in what reads now as a bizarre courtroom moment, Lizzie testified that some of their heads were “off” when they were brought dead into the house (Kent and Flynn 87).

The Illness

Andrew and Abby spent the night before the murders vomiting. Lizzie was also ill but did not vomit. Abby went to Dr. Bowen's for treatment, and he returned with her to the house to examine Andrew, but he had strongly discouraged Abby from seeking medical assistance herself and refused treatment. Bridget was not ill that night, but claimed to have been quite ill the morning of the murders, and her version of the events that day includes 10-15 minutes spent outside vomiting. De Mille interprets the Borden illness in the context of the inadequacies of Victorian food preservation methods, “The ‘summer sickness’ our grandmothers remembered as a usual seasonal affliction” (*Dance of Death* 32), an element parodied in Carter's

“The Fall River Axe Murders.” However, Abby allegedly voiced concern that the family was being poisoned, and Lizzie had a conversation with her friend Alice Russell the night before the murders in which she mentioned that possibility. In the same conversation, she uttered the eerily prophetic, much-quoted concern, “I am afraid somebody will do something.” She also mentioned the burglaries and her embarrassment at Andrew’s treatment of Dr. Bowen the night before (Radin 56).

Poison

Eli Bence, an employee at a local drug store, identified Lizzie as a woman who had come into the shop the day before the murders trying to buy prussic acid, which is highly poisonous and for which a prescription is required, allegedly for the purpose of cleaning a seal skin cape. Radin reports that his identification of Lizzie was merely by voice and contradicted by the testimony of other witnesses (3). Jennings objected to the use of Bence’s inquest testimony at the trial, and it was consequently excluded. As mentioned previously, poison was considered in relation to the family’s illness the night before the murders, but the contents of the victims’ stomach showed no trace of poison of any kind (“No Trace”).

The Murders

The Heat

It is generally believed that the murders were committed during a heat wave. Radin describes the 4th of August as “the hottest day of the year” (3). Others, however, have questioned the weather on the day, suggesting temperatures were not

unusually high for the time of year.¹⁴⁰ The heat of the barn loft (whether it would have been tolerable let alone a desirable place to pass the time on the day of the murders, as Lizzie's alibi would have it) has been the particular focus of debates surrounding the weather on the morning of the murders.

Mutton

The Borden family had mutton for dinner the weekend before the murders, and it was still appearing on their table in the form of leftovers on the morning of the murders. This fact has been variably linked to Andrew's frugality, the family illness, and the monotony of the household. The re-enactment group from the Lizzie Borden House Bed and Breakfast are called "The Muttoneaters."

Menstruation

Lizzie was menstruating at the time of the murders (Lincoln 46, Radin 228, Sullivan 126-128). (So she must have done it, right?!) When she was questioned at the inquest as to the origin of a spot of blood on one of her skirts, it is alleged that rather than broach the "embarrassing" subject of menstruation, Lizzie claimed the blood had come from "flea bites" (Kent and Flynn 92).

Apart from the mention of "flea bites," details relating to menstruation were largely avoided at the trial, but in his closing statement, George D. Robinson touched upon the matter, which had come up briefly during the cross-examination of a medical witness, Professor Wood: "I forebear to allude to what is proved in this case, Miss Borden's illness, monthly illness, at that time, and to tell you or remind you that Professor Wood said he would not undertake that that blood was not the menstrual

¹⁴⁰ See Thibault.

blood" (Pearson *Trial* 291). According to Radin (among others), the lawyers agreed not to go too deeply into the particulars (228), but there was some discussion about the supposed soaking or disposal of some bloody rags, allegedly menstrual rags, in a pail Lizzie carried down to the cellar on the evening of the murders. To address the bloody rags, Lizzie apparently entered the room in which the clothing of the victims was being held, while Alice Russell waited at the door.

Accounts of the Borden story often address the role Lizzie's period may have played in the murders. It features significantly in Victoria Lincoln's account, for example, which holds that Lizzie's menstrual periods were accompanied by epileptic fits, one of which accounts for the circumstances of the murder, in her take. In Marjorie Conn's theatrical production, Lizzie hides a damp menstrual cloth she used to wipe the victims' blood with her real menstrual rags in a bucket.

Window-washing

The morning of the murders, despite the alleged heat and Bridget's alleged illness, Abby Borden asked Bridget to wash all the windows in the house, inside and out. It is not clear exactly when the request was made or in front of whom. Morse testified that he heard Abby make the request, but Bridget testified that she was asked after Morse had left the house.

The Sick Note

On the morning of the murders, Lizzie told everyone that Abby had received a note from someone sick and gone out to visit him/her. No one else ever saw the note; it was never found, and no one ever came forward as having written it.

The Laugh

This is a particularly titillating detail: Bridget allegedly went to the door to admit Andrew Borden to the house when he returned from errands in town on the morning of the murders. She struggled with the locks, and apparently uttered some kind of expletive. (“Pshaw,” she claimed.) Bridget claimed she then heard Lizzie laugh, apparently in response to her frustration. Lizzie claimed (though not consistently) that she was at the top of the stairs when Bridget was at the door, which would have placed her rather near Abby’s body, although—as various experiments revealed—not, as the prosecution had implied, in view of the body (Kent and Flynn156).¹⁴¹

Inquest, Arrest, Trial, Acquittal: 5 August 1892 – 21 June 1893

The Burning of a Dress

The Sunday after the murders, in broad daylight, in front of Emma and Alice Russell, Lizzie burned a dress in the kitchen furnace. A dressmaker confirmed Lizzie’s claim that it had been soiled with paint a long time before the murders. Various testimony was given in an attempt to reveal whether it was the dress she was wearing on the morning of the murders (which various parties swore under oath had no blood on it), but conflicting testimonies were given (Sullivan 101). It was Alice Russell who reported the burning of the dress, some time after the event.

¹⁴¹ De Mille adamantly refutes this point, alleging based on her visit to the Borden home that one could certainly have seen the body from the stairs (*Dance of Death* 98-99).

Lizzie's arrest

Lizzie's arrest was long anticipated in the news, but when she was informed that she was a suspect, Emma reportedly said to her, "We tried to keep it from you as long as we could" (Kent and Flynn 280). An initial warrant for Lizzie's arrest was not served; this is often interpreted as reluctance on the part of the police to arrest her.

Inquest inconsistencies

Lizzie's inquest testimony was not internally consistent, nor was it entirely consistent with her subsequent testimony in court. The main variation was in relation to her minute-to-minute whereabouts over the course of the morning. The inquest testimony was not admitted in the trial, a fact to which many attribute her acquittal. The testimony was excluded because "the court ruled that Lizzie had been under virtual arrest while being questioned" (Radin 147).

Lizzie's Alibi: Pears and Sinkers

Lizzie's alibi was someone confused and arguably far-fetched. She claimed that she had gone to the barn to look for lead to use for sinkers on an upcoming trip to Marion and that she had spent some time in the barn loft sorting through a bucket of metal scraps, eating pears that had fallen from a tree in the backyard, and looking out the window. The trial included a long interview regarding her eating of pears and the length of time it took her to eat three. Lizzie's claim of having gone to the barn that morning was initially refuted on the basis of police officer William H. Medley's testimony that there were no footprints in the barn when he checked it after the murders. The defence undermined his testimony by demonstrating that numerous

people had already been in the barn subsequent to the murders and prior to his arrival (Radin 156). Lizzie's time spent in the barn gave a very short window of time in which the murders might have been committed. It also placed her, as the prosecution sought to emphasize, in the one place out of view of the kitchen door and very likely the hottest spot possible on the grounds (Kent and Flynn 82).

The Trial

The trial was extremely well-attended and covered extensively in the news. A few courtroom moments were particularly noteworthy. The opening and closing statements were very dramatic and are much quoted in accounts of the trial. The aforementioned exclusion of Eli Bence's poison testimony and Lizzie's inquest testimony were also significant. Impressions as to Lizzie's whereabouts and composure were impacted by the revelation that she had been administered morphine routinely since the morning of the murders (Kent and Flynn 234). The skulls of Andrew and Abby Borden were produced in court at one point, causing Lizzie to faint.

The testimony of Hyman Lubinsky that he had seen a woman emerging from the barn just after the murders were probably committed substantially aided the case of the defence, as did the testimony of two young boys, Everett Brown and Thomas E. Barlow (or, in Barlow's much-quoted abbreviation, "Brownie and Me"), who claimed to have snuck up into the barn just after the murders were reported. Their testimony undermined officer Medley's testimony as to lack of footprints, but it also

suggested the barn might not have been as hot as the prosecution had sought to emphasize (and, indeed, as Lizzie herself had testified) (Pearson *Trial* 259).

Hanscom: The Pinkerton Detective

Given that the story lends itself so readily to the detective genre, it is surprising not more is made in Lizzie Borden versions of the relatively little-known private detective hired by the Bordens after the murders. Sullivan notes that “Emma...and Lizzie had, immediately after the murders, hired Oscar W. Hanscom, the Pinkerton detective” (161). Sullivan continues, “The folly of doing this was soon apparent to either the Borden sisters or their attorneys, for Hanscom disappeared from the scene a short time after he was employed. Emma, in her testimony in cross-examination, minimized Detective Hanscom’s role” (161). However, his name appears in numerous newspaper reports from this period, with contradictory reports as to his role.¹⁴²

The Weapon

Two axes were found in the basement. One was on the chopping block. It had hair and blood on it that turned out to be cow’s hair and blood. The other, with a “newly” broken-off handle was in a box on a shelf covered with ash. A chemical test showed no blood on it, and an expert witness testified it would have taken a very thorough wash to rid the axe of blood. A small amount of dirt found on the axe suggested no such thorough wash had occurred. The axe did fit the wounds in the Bordens’ skulls, though, as a courtroom demonstration gorily revealed. Much controversy surrounds the question of the “handle-less hatchet” (Radin 145), but it is

¹⁴² See Kent and Flynn 20, 22, 30, 35, 37, 49, 118, 176, 291, 293.

generally regarded today as probably not the murder weapon. (Somewhat astonishingly, De Mille rented it from the Fall River Historical Society for her televised re-enactment of the Borden story.)

Post-trial

To everyone's surprise and disappointment, Lizzie declined to comment publicly on the murders after the trial (Radin 233). Lizzie and Emma split Lizzie's legal fees, sold the house on Second Street, and bought a mansion in the more fashionable part of town. They named it Maplecroft (Sullivan 5). Lizzie changed her name, too—to Lizbeth (Sullivan 209). A rumour that Lizzie was engaged to a Swansea farm boy circulated briefly, but she never married (Radin 237).

Lizzie and Lesbianism

Lizzie became friends with Nance O'Neil, a famous actress, which was controversial at the time because of Nance's occupation. It is often depicted in more recent accounts with lesbian undertones. For more on Lizzie and lesbianism, see Jones "Rebels of their Sex." For fictional versions, see Hunter and Engstrom.

The Break with Emma

Another publicized turn in the post-trial life of Lizzie Borden was the breakdown of the relationship between her and Emma in 1905. Emma moved out of Maplecroft and in with Reverend Jubb's sisters, telling reporters, "The happenings in the French Street house that caused me to leave I must refuse to talk about [...] I did

not go until conditions became absolutely unbearable” (quoted in Radin 241).

Emma’s departure is often linked to Lizzie’s purported relationship with Nance.

Rumours and other tidbits

The rhyme “Lizzie Borden took an Axe / Gave her mother forty whacks /
When she saw what she had done / Gave her father forty-one” is often incorporated into accounts of the murders, both fictional and non-fictional (including academic). Radin cites an amusing rumour that when Dr. Bowen asked for a sheet to cover Andrew’s body, Lizzie muttered “Better get two” (266). Pearson offers another “bit of jocular,” which “was that, on the morning of the fatal 4th of August, someone asked Miss Lizzie the time of day. ‘I don’t know,’ she replied, ‘but I’ll go and axe Father’” (*Trial 22*).

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